



**This electronic thesis or dissertation has been
downloaded from Explore Bristol Research,
<http://research-information.bristol.ac.uk>**

Author:

Compson, Jane Frances

Title:

**A critical analysis of John Hick's pluralistic hypothesis in the light of the Buddha's
attitude towards othe teachings as demonstrated in the Pali Nikayas.**

General rights

Access to the thesis is subject to the Creative Commons Attribution - NonCommercial-No Derivatives 4.0 International Public License. A copy of this may be found at <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/legalcode> This license sets out your rights and the restrictions that apply to your access to the thesis so it is important you read this before proceeding.

Take down policy

Some pages of this thesis may have been removed for copyright restrictions prior to having it been deposited in Explore Bristol Research. However, if you have discovered material within the thesis that you consider to be unlawful e.g. breaches of copyright (either yours or that of a third party) or any other law, including but not limited to those relating to patent, trademark, confidentiality, data protection, obscenity, defamation, libel, then please contact collections-metadata@bristol.ac.uk and include the following information in your message:

- Your contact details
- Bibliographic details for the item, including a URL
- An outline nature of the complaint

Your claim will be investigated and, where appropriate, the item in question will be removed from public view as soon as possible.

**A Critical Analysis of John Hick's Pluralistic
Hypothesis in the Light of the Buddha's
Attitude towards Other Teachings as
Demonstrated in the Pali Nikāyas.**

By

Jane Frances Compson

**Submitted for the qualification of Doctor of Philosophy
University of Bristol, Department of Theology and Religious Studies,
Faculty of Arts.**

30 September 1998.

After this emphasis on the theoretical elements of criteria for liberation, in chapter five there is an extensive consideration of how the Buddha dealt with other groups and teachings in practice. This chapter culminates in a summary of the Buddha's attitude towards others. In chapter six there is a critical analysis of Hick's hypothesis in the light of these findings from the Buddhist tradition. It is argued that Hick's hypothesis is incoherent on significant counts and that the Buddhist account presented in this thesis offers a more coherent way of relating to other teachings.

ABSTRACT

This thesis consists of a critical analysis of John Hick's post-Copernican pluralistic hypothesis in the light of the Buddha's attitude towards other groups in the Nikāyas. It begins with a survey of some of the methodological problems that arise both when engaging in a cross-cultural comparison and when dealing with primary texts. The first chapter introduces and summarises the thought of John Hick, focussing mainly on his pluralistic hypothesis. The second chapter consists of a brief introduction to the historical and cultural background of the Buddha's world, and the other groups that he would have encountered. There is a short summary of the Buddha's teachings to provide a context for the rest of the thesis. The third chapter focuses on how liberation is defined in Buddhist terms by comparing the qualities of those who are guaranteed liberation and those who are not. This elucidates what criteria must be fulfilled in order to gain liberation; these criteria of practice are crystallised in the noble eightfold path. The fourth chapter contains a discussion of the role of view in the liberation process, and distinguishes between two different forms of right view, the ordinary and transcendent. After this emphasis on the theoretical elements of criteria for liberation, in chapter five there is an extensive consideration of how the Buddha dealt with other groups and teachings in practice. This chapter culminates in a summary of the Buddha's attitude towards others. In chapter six there is a critical analysis of Hick's hypothesis in the light of these findings from the Buddhist tradition. It is argued that Hick's hypothesis is incoherent on significant counts and that the Buddhist account presented in this thesis offers a more coherent way of relating to other teachings.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

So many people have supported me through my years of research that they are too many to mention. I am grateful to all of them. I would like in particular to thank my supervisors, Dr. Rupert Gethin and Dr. Gavin D'Costa, for their guidance, friendship and patience. I also wish to thank the British Academy for funding me for the first three years. My family have, as usual, been of unerring support – thank you. I am also extremely grateful for the assistance of my friends, particularly Sarah Heymans, Kenton Lewis, Rupert Warne and Richard Cookson, who have helped with proof-reading.

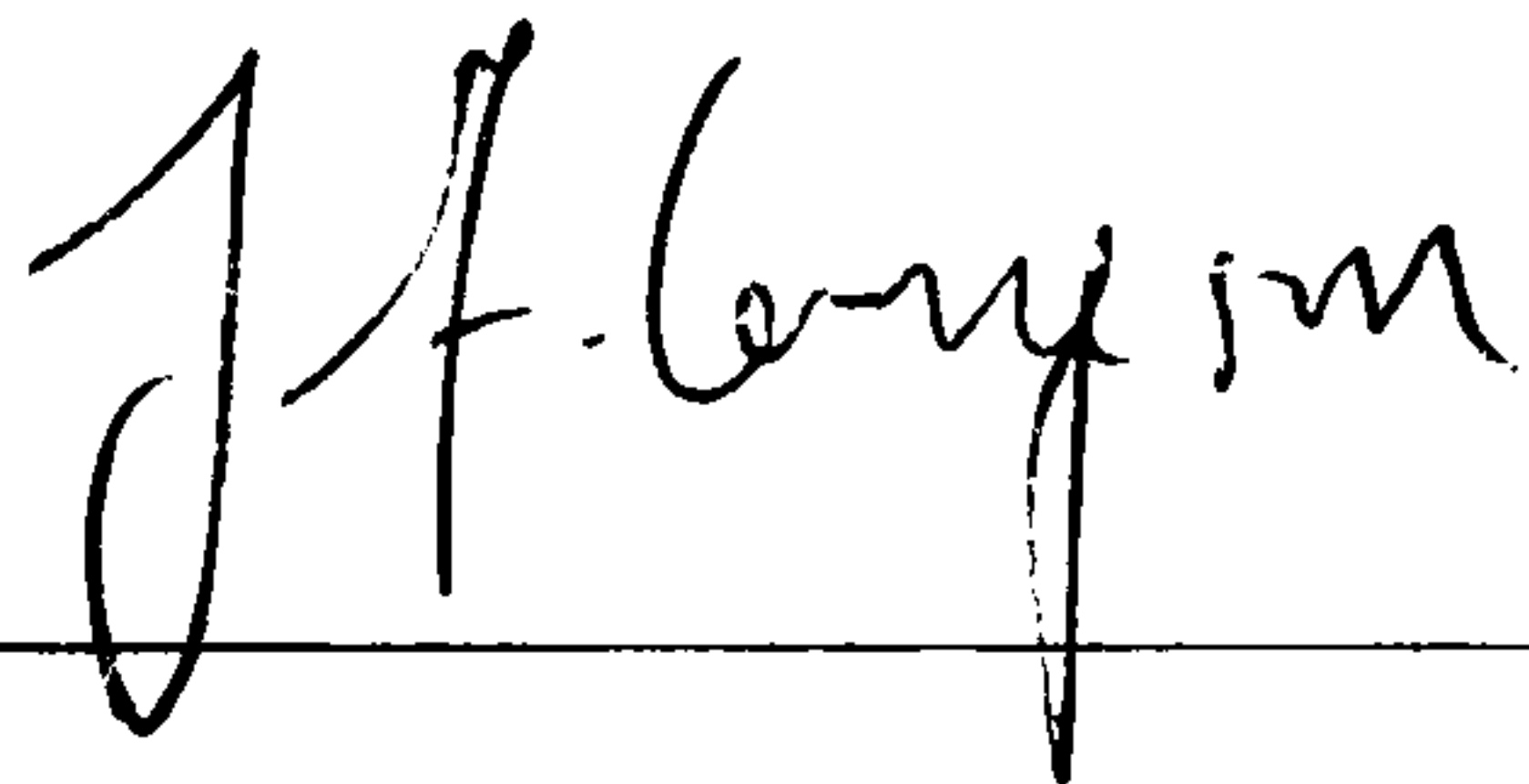
AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the Regulations of the University of Bristol. The work is original except where indicated by special reference in the text and no part of the dissertation has been submitted for any other degree.

Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author and in no way represent those of the University of Bristol.

The dissertation has not been presented to any other University for examination either in the United Kingdom or overseas.

SIGNED:



DATE: 9/2/99.

For all my teachers.

ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviation	Meaning
D	Dīgha Nikāya
M	Majjhima Nikāya
S	Samyutta Nikāya
A	Aṅguttara Nikāya

A Note on Translations

In this thesis I have used existing English translations of Pali texts. When I have cited a translation I have written a reference to the Pali version in the Nikāyas, then the translator's name, followed by the page reference of the translation.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	4
CONTEXT.....	4
METHODOLOGICAL	8
<i>Cross-cultural comparison</i>	9
<i>Texts and Meanings</i>	20
THE STRUCTURE OF THE THESIS.....	27
SECTION ONE:	
JOHN HICK'S PLURALISTIC HYPOTHESIS.	30
CHAPTER ONE: JOHN HICK'S POST-COPERNICAN PLURALISTIC HYPOTHESIS.	
.....	31
CONTEXT: THE THREEFOLD TYPOLOGY.....	31
THE DEVELOPMENT OF HICK'S THOUGHT.....	34
THE POST-COPERNICAN PLURALISTIC HYPOTHESIS.....	37
<i>Religious or 'Mystical' Experiences</i>	41
<i>The Personae and Impersonae of the Real</i>	44
<i>The impossibility of unmediated experience of the Real</i>	45
<i>The Real</i>	46
<i>The Soteriological Authenticity of Religious Traditions</i>	48
THE ETHICAL CRITERION — THE 'GOLDEN RULE'.....	51
THE PLURALIST HYPOTHESIS AND BUDDHISM.....	55
<i>Nibbāna as a manifestation of the real</i>	57
<i>The Unanswered Questions: Hick's understanding of views and doctrines</i>	59
<i>Skilful Means</i>	66
<i>Skilful Means in Relation to Other Traditions</i>	68
SUMMARY.....	75
SECTION TWO:	
THE BUDDHA'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS OTHER VIEWS, GROUPS AND	
TEACHINGS IN THE NIKĀYAS.	77
CHAPTER TWO: A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO THE BUDDHA'S THOUGHT.....	78
THE PALI CANON.....	80
THE BUDDHA.....	84
<i>The Buddha's World</i>	84
<i>The Brahmanical Tradition</i>	85
<i>The Renouncer Tradition</i>	88
<i>The Buddha</i>	92
DHAMMA: THE FOUR NOBLE TRUTHS	95
<i>The First Noble Truth</i>	95
<i>The Second Noble Truth</i>	96
<i>The Third Noble Truth: Nibbāna, the Cessation of Suffering</i>	98
<i>The Fourth Noble Truth: The Way to the Cessation of Suffering</i>	101
<i>Summary</i>	106
CHAPTER THREE: LIBERATED AND NON-LIBERATED INDIVIDUALS	108
THE NOBLE DISCIPLE/ORDINARY PERSON DISTINCTION.....	108
THE 'ORDINARY PERSON' (<i>PUTHUUJANA</i>).....	109
THE FOUR TYPES OF NOBLE DISCIPLE.....	113
<i>The Streamwinner</i>	114
<i>The Once-Returner</i>	117
<i>The Never-Returner</i>	117

<i>The Arahāt</i>	117
<i>The Paccekabuddha</i>	118
THE EIGHTFOLD PATH AS THE DISTILLATION OF SPIRITUAL PRACTICE.	120
<i>What is the Eightfold Path?</i>	120
THE EIGHTFOLD PATH AND OTHER DESCRIPTIONS OF THE WAY TO LIBERATION.....	122
THE SPIRITUAL DIVISION OF 'TRANSCENDENT' AND 'ORDINARY' IN THE EIGHTFOLD PATH.	125
<i>The Causality of Liberation</i>	129
<i>Summary</i>	134
CHAPTER FOUR: THE ROLE OF VIEW IN THE LIBERATION PROCESS.....	135
WRONG VIEW AND 'ORDINARY' RIGHT VIEW.....	135
<i>Views wrong because of the Negative Causal Cycle they Promote.</i>	136
<i>Are views wrong because they are cognitively false?</i>	137
<i>'Incentives' for holding lower right views.</i>	138
<i>Wrong View and Lower Right View — Summary</i>	140
<i>Brahmajāla Sutta: SPECULATIVE WRONG VIEWS</i>	141
<i>The Views of the 'Eel-Wrigglers'.</i>	144
<i>The Arising of Views.</i>	146
<i>Speculative Views and the Self-View.</i>	147
THE UNANSWERED QUESTIONS: WHY ARE CERTAIN SPECULATIVE QUESTIONS LEFT WITHOUT AN ANSWER?.....	151
<i>Was the Buddha an agnostic?</i>	152
<i>Not conducive to the path to liberation.</i>	153
<i>The questions are incoherent.</i>	154
<i>Views Wrong Because They are a Source of Dispute.</i>	158
TRANSCENDENT RIGHT VIEW.....	160
TWO LEVELS OF TRUTH	167
SUMMARY.....	168
CHAPTER FIVE: THE BUDDHA'S ATTITUDE TO OTHER TEACHINGS.....	170
VIEWS AT ODDS WITH THE HOLY LIFE.....	171
'COMFORTLESS' VIEWS REJECTED BECAUSE OF THEIR MEANS OF KNOWLEDGE.....	173
THE 'TRUE' BRAHMACARIYA : PERSONAL INSIGHT AS A VALID MEANS OF KNOWLEDGE.....	174
THE CORRECT ATTITUDE FOR AN ORDINARY PERSON.	179
THE SUPERIORITY OF THE BUDDHA'S TEACHINGS: THE <i>Mahāsīhanāda Sutta</i>	181
<i>Udumbarika-Sīhanāda Sutta: ACCEPTANCE OF OTHER TEACHINGS</i>	188
SPECIFIC GROUPS	192
<i>Wanderers and Ascetics (Paribbājakas and Samaṇas).</i>	192
<i>Followers of Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta.</i>	206
<i>Brahmins</i>	215
SUMMARY.....	221
SECTION THREE:	
CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF HICK'S HYPOTHESIS IN THE LIGHT OF THE BUDDHA'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS OTHER TEACHINGS.....	224
CHAPTER SIX: CRITICAL EVALUATION OF HICK'S POST-COPERNICAN HYPOTHESIS.....	225
HICK'S HYPOTHESIS EXCLUDES BUDDHIST SELF-UNDERSTANDING.....	227
<i>The Unanswered Questions.</i>	227
<i>Skilful Means: the Presupposition of Complete Knowledge.</i>	231
IS HICK AN EXCLUSIVIST?	238
HICK'S ACCOUNT IS UNDERMINED BY INCOHERENCE.....	243
THE GREATER COHERENCE OF THE BUDDHA'S APPROACH.....	245
HOW MIGHT THE BUDDHA HAVE VIEWED HICK'S HYPOTHESIS?	247
<i>Hick's hypothesis as Ordinary Right View.</i>	248
<i>Hick shows the right attitude for an ordinary person.</i>	253
<i>Summary</i>	256

CONCLUSION.....257

BIBLIOGRAPHY.....260

INTRODUCTION

Context.

One of the subject areas that has dominated religious studies in Western universities in recent decades is the issue of inter-religious dialogue and religious pluralism. As our society becomes increasingly multicultural and we grow in awareness of different global traditions, there is an increasing tendency to compare different world-views. The issue of the relationship between various faith traditions is of great importance in contemporary religious studies or cross-cultural debates. All religious traditions (and not just religious traditions) make claims about the nature of reality, each presenting itself as having insight (in very differing forms) into the truth of the human condition, and the way to some kind of ‘salvation’ and ‘liberation’. It is when these claims contradict each other that the problems arise — logic demands that not all of them can be completely true when understood at face value. It is with this fundamental difficulty that the growing area of inter-faith debate is concerned: what is the relationship between all these different claims — how can they be verified or falsified as traditions that bring ‘salvation’ or ‘liberation’, and what criteria should be applied to establish this? How does one decide which claims are true, and can this be done at all? How can adherents of radically different traditions, with their contradictory values, co-exist peacefully? Is it one’s duty to proselytise if one thinks one has the truth, and how can one relate to a missionary from another tradition who is equally certain of the truth, but whose version of it bears absolutely no apparent relation to one’s own? Is it possible to affirm the truth of one’s own tradition without denigrating the value of other traditions?

The roots of ‘pluralist society’, in which different religious traditions regularly encounter each other, can be traced back to Hellenic classical culture. In Britain and Europe, strongholds of Christianity, the issue of other religions and how to approach them received wide public attention in the 1860’s and 70’s, but the antecedents to these inter-religious encounters occurred a long time before that.¹ In his history of comparative religion, Sharpe explains that Hellenic classical culture was relatively indifferent to the existence of other religions until contacts with other cultures became more extensive, prompting description of the beliefs and practices of the ‘barbarians’ that were encountered. Ionic philosophers saw

¹See E. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion: A History* (London, Duckworth, 1975).

religious practices of other cultures more as objects of curiosity than as rival systems. However, this Hellenic attitude of 'intellectual hospitality' contrasted sharply with the intolerance and exclusiveness found in the Judeo-Christian tradition.² Sharpe argues that the more intolerant attitude associated with the Christian tradition had its roots in the history of Israel, where the worship of Yahweh was considered threatened by the worship of other gods. As a result, the Jewish tradition was polemical in its response to other religions, and the Christian church adopted a similar attitude. There is a long history of Christian encounters with other religious traditions: in the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Christian crusades were launched against Islam and Judaism. In the Renaissance, a revival of interest in classical cultures, including Greek mythology, led to a greater awareness of 'rival' traditions. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, missionary contacts with the Far East, India and China brought an awareness of 'Eastern' religious traditions, such as Confucianism in addition to the gradual discovery of Buddhism.³ This is testified by the existence of seventeenth century translations of Chinese texts, and various books about the new-found religions of the world. Sharpe identifies the nineteenth century as a time of 'Indo-European awakening' in which European cultures became fascinated by the religious traditions of India. This century saw the translation of the Upaniṣads, for example, and in 1814 the creation of the first Chair of Sanskrit in Paris. Philosophers such as Schopenhauer had a strong influence in popularising the Upaniṣads, for example, whilst Buddhist texts began to be translated into European languages.

In the present century, increases in communication, immigration and travel have continued this process of inter-religious encounter that has such ancient roots. In Europe there have inevitably been numerous different ways in which religious traditions have reacted with each other. In an attempt to sort and categorise these various responses, theologians and philosophers of religion have developed a theoretical meta-language to facilitate analysis of the inter-religious debate. Since Europe has been a predominantly Christian culture, these responses and theories tend to be grounded in the Christian tradition. One of the best-known and most popularly used analyses in the field of modern Western religious studies is the three-fold typology of inclusivism, exclusivism and pluralism. This typology was first introduced by John Farquhar in 1913⁴, and revived in terms of the

²E. Sharpe, *Comparative Religion*, p.7.

³ See J.W. de Jong, *History of Buddhist Studies in Europe* (Varanasi, Bharat Bharati, 1976), who charts the development on Western interest in Buddhism from Alexander the Great to the present day.

⁴John Farquhar, *The Crown of Hinduism* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1913).

contemporary inter-faith debate by Alan Race⁵. It has been widely adopted as a means of categorising and understanding how different religious adherents cope with the truth-claims from other traditions, or sub-sets within traditions. The term ‘pluralism’ in particular has worked its way into the contemporary theological consciousness, having been championed by influential modern philosophers of religion, most notably John Hick.⁶

The categories of this three-fold typology can be summarised as follows:

Exclusivism holds that only one single religion or revelation is true, and all others are false. As D’Costa explains, an important distinguishing characteristic of this position is that “truth, revelation and salvation are tightly and explicitly connected.”⁷ Inclusivists, on the other hand, claim that only one tradition or revelation is true, but that nevertheless other religions can have a partial or incomplete understanding of the truth and therefore salvation, and are thus not to be totally dismissed. The yardstick for judging the truth and salvific efficacy of other religions or denominations is provided by the one true tradition — other religions are considered truthful insofar as they do not contradict the truth found within the ‘true’ tradition, but in some sense, reflect and endorse it. Finally pluralism describes the opinion that all the major religious traditions have a partial and incomplete understanding of truth and thus salvation, but none is in a position to claim the definitive truth, which transcends human understanding. They are all, therefore, partially true manifestations of the Transcendent, and as such have equal validity. This typology will be returned to in greater depth in chapter one.

In this thesis I intend to focus upon the ‘pluralist’ paradigm. This is because one of my aims is to compare a ‘Western’, ‘Christian-based’ paradigm for understanding and approaching other religions with the attitude found in the Pali Nikāyas of early Buddhism. Unlike exclusivism and inclusivism, pluralism argues that all religions (with some qualifications) are equal, but this equality is enabled by the fact that they all offer partial, incomplete versions of the truth. It thus ‘speaks for’ other religions, describing ‘on their behalf’ the actual nature of their truth claims. Exclusivism and inclusivism also speak for other religions; however, for an exclusivist or inclusivist, it would not matter if representatives of the religion being described were to object to such ‘spokesmanship’ as inaccurate and at odds with

⁵Alan Race, *Christians and Religious Pluralism* (Second Edition, London, SCM, 1993). See in particular pp.10-105 for an outline of Race's threefold typology, and pp.152-167 for a discussion of developments in the field since Race first put forward his thesis in 1983.

⁶For example, John Hick's *An Interpretation of Religion: human responses to the transcendent* (London, Macmillan, 1989).

⁷Gavin D'Costa, “The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions”, *Religious Studies* 32, 1996, pp. 223-232.

their own self-understanding. It would not matter because one of the underlying assumptions of both inclusivism and exclusivism is that the ‘home tradition’ from which other traditions are being judged is somehow more ‘true’, and in a better position to make accurate judgements, than the traditions which they are judging. This is not the case with pluralism, however; it maintains that all the main religious traditions come from a position of epistemic equality. All religions are equal, no one tradition is nearer to the truth than any other. In not denigrating the claims of other traditions, pluralism seeks to be acceptable to them. The implication here, then, is that a strong pluralist hypothesis should be as acceptable to a Buddhist as it is to a Muslim or a Christian. If this is shown *not* to be the case, then surely the pluralist hypothesis will have failed, for if it includes one tradition to the exclusion of another it becomes a sort of exclusivism or inclusivism. In other words, it denies the truth-claims and self-understandings of the traditions described in favour of the theories of the observer, or of another tradition. One of my aims in this thesis is to ‘test’ a pluralist hypothesis — in this case, one from a contemporary Christian theologian — by comparing it with the self-understanding of a Buddhist tradition.

There are many different forms of pluralism; for the purposes of clarity and focus in this thesis I will focus on just one form, evinced by the popular British theologian, John Hick. I have chosen Hick because he is one of the best known and most widely respected British pluralist philosopher/theologians. I have also chosen his work because he often deals explicitly with Buddhism and thus provides specific points of comparison where his claims about what Buddhism is ‘actually saying’ can be compared to attitudes that are found in the Nikāyas.

It is important to note that these claims arise from a Western academic and philosophical tradition. For example, John Hick writes from a Christian background, and from within a Western philosophical tradition. For example, as we shall see in chapter one, Hick's thought is strongly influenced by the thought of Immanuel Kant (see below, p.33). Hick himself acknowledges that his work comes from a “Western stream of culture”⁸, and is aware that “contemporary religious pluralism has arisen within and been supported by a particular historical, social and political context.”⁹ His theories, however, deal with non-western religious traditions, such as Hinduism and Buddhism. In this thesis I wish to

⁸John Hick, *Faith and Knowledge* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1957), p. x. The first of his written works, this book provides a clear demonstration of Hick's philosophical heritage. In it, he discusses the “problem of the nature of religious faith” (p. ix), comparing various theological and Western philosophical accounts of faith and knowledge.

⁹John Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths: critical dialogues on religious pluralism* (London, SCM, 1995), p.31.

evaluate Hick's thought from the perspective of the Buddhist tradition, in order to understand whether Hick's hypothesis 'works' from this tradition. Hick's hypothesis is intended to be acceptable to all the different traditions that it encompasses — his aim is to explain how all the varying traditions can co-exist peacefully without compromising their own truth-claims or individual characteristics, but yet remain equally valid and true. If this aim is shown not to have been realised within any one of these traditions, then his hypothesis as it stands is problematic. My initial motivation for writing this thesis, then, was to consider Hick's pluralistic thesis from a 'Buddhist' perspective.

In the present context, 'Buddhist' means the attitude found within a particular collection of texts, the Pali Nikāyas. The purpose of this exercise is twofold — firstly to establish a theory of how the Buddha viewed other religions, and thus to get a 'Buddhist' perspective on the inter-faith debate, and secondly to evaluate Hick's pluralistic hypothesis from this standpoint.

Methodological

There are many methodological problems that arise when undertaking a thesis of this type, and these will be briefly considered in this section. There are three main areas of difficulty: firstly, this thesis will involve some cross-cultural comparison by comparing an Indian culture with a European one. This is problematic because it is likely that the different cultural backgrounds will lead to different underlying assumptions and attitudes, with the result that the same word or concept might have a different meaning for each culture. Secondly, there is not only this difference in meaning provided by different cultural contexts, but a considerable time-difference between the century in which this thesis is written, and the early Buddhist culture on which it predominantly focuses. One must therefore be aware that texts from different eras come from fundamentally different contexts, and that this leads to complications and ambiguities with the discovery of meaning. Thirdly, the Buddhist sources on which this study is based, the Pali Nikāyas, are textual sources, subject to many potential modes of interpretation which are influenced by the aforementioned cultural and historical factors. This raises many questions — which of these interpretations is 'true'; is it even possible to find a 'true' interpretation, and what do we mean when we say an interpretation is 'true'?

There are various contemporary debates about these issues. My intention in this section is not to find a definitive answer to the methodological questions raised. Indeed, I would suggest that no such 'definitive answers' are possible, given that values and meanings change according to different cultural or historical

contexts from which they arise. Instead, I intend to demonstrate some of the different approaches to these issues, and finally to locate my thesis in a particular methodological tradition.

Cross-cultural comparison

One of the difficulties of cross-cultural studies is that an observer from one culture may bring presuppositions and deeply embedded cultural assumptions to his or her study of another culture and thus see meanings that are not really there. This is true not only cross-culturally but also across the span of time. Medieval European thinking, for example, saw the universe as structured by and subject to a divine hierarchy of supernatural forces: "From the supernatural world above radiated a sacred organising power which structured all their experience of space and time, of the world and society and the individual's life-history."¹⁰ Contrast this to the modern scientific European consciousness, in which science has been thoroughly secularised, and understood as controlled by discoverable natural forces that, for most people, are religiously and morally neutral. Thus the significance and meaning of, for example, a thunder storm for a fourteenth century British woman would be radically different from its significance for a contemporary British woman. These issues are pertinent to the subject matter of this thesis, for underlying some of the debates discussed is the presupposition that 'religions' are discrete entities which must find a way to interact. In his book, *The Meaning and End of Religion*¹¹, Wilfred Cantwell Smith traces the history of the term and concept of 'religion', and argues that it is an unhelpful term which encourages us to view religions as contraposed entities. He argues that there are no 'essences' to religious traditions. The term 'religion' covers historical, ontological, sociological and doctrinal aspects of meaning, rendering it impossible to define exactly what the 'essence' of a religion is. Smith contends that the hunt for essences is a product of the Western philosophical tradition¹², and that the notion of religion as an intellectual construct is the product of the enlightenment¹³. Before this, 'religion' referred to a personal sense of the holy, rather than referring to an objective phenomenon. Since the concept of 'religion' is a product of the Western tradition, it is not shared by other cultures. Smith points out that very few languages have a term for 'religion', and that, with the exception of Islam, there is no such concept

¹⁰Don Cupitt, *The Sea of Faith* (London, BBC, 1985).

¹¹Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (London, Macmillan, 1978)

¹²Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (p.47), cites Feuerbach's work, *The Essence of Religion* (New York, 1878, trans. A. Loos) as the starting point for this tendency to look for essences.

¹³Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, p.38.

outside Western culture. Smith argues that it would be better to drop the concept altogether, for it leads to misunderstandings:

“a Christian can come to an adequate understanding of his faith; or a Muslim of his, and indeed, either of them come to an understanding of each other’s, only if he extricate himself from a concern as to the essence or nature of Christianity or Islam, only if he shift his attention away from questions such as ‘What is true Christianity?’, ‘What is real Islam?’ Both the Indologist and the Hindu are seriously distracted, if not misled, by the notion ‘Hinduism’.”¹⁴

Turning explicitly to Buddhism, Smith argues that Buddhist traditions do have concepts of different ‘groups’ and ‘sects’ with different beliefs, but these are all subsumed within the religious life, and signify the doctrinal position of a particular community; such terms were not used in an equivalent sense to the modern-day concept ‘religion’, which suggests a discrete entity of specifically delineated beliefs. Speaking of the often-asked question of whether or not Buddhism is a religion or a philosophy, Smith argues that ancient Buddhism would be incapable of asking such a question, for the philosophy-religion distinction did not exist. This point is illustrated by Gethin when he explains that there is a tendency amongst Western philosophers to make comparisons between their own preoccupations and the Buddhist philosophical claims such as not-self and dependent origination. In the Buddhist tradition, such concepts are not pursued for their own sake, but are all part of the spiritual path, whereas in Western philosophy issues such as causality and selfhood do not have an inherently ‘religious’ connection: “The danger is that we rather too hastily translate the Nikāyas into terms that are more congenial to us without having first understood the original language.”¹⁵ A ‘case-study’ of how such misunderstandings or misinterpretations can take place is provided in the following example by Gombrich:

“In Western languages, the Buddha is presented as having taught the doctrine (*vada*) of ‘no soul’ (*anatman*). What is being denied — what is a soul? Western languages are at home in the Christian cultural tradition. Christian theologians have differed vastly over what the soul is. For Aristotle, and thus for Aquinas, it is the form of the body, what makes a given individual person a whole rather than a mere assemblage

¹⁴Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, p.12.

¹⁵Rupert Gethin, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening: A Study of the Bodhi-pakkiya dhamma* (Leiden, Brill, 1992), p.19.

of parts. However, most Christians conceive of the soul, however vaguely, in a completely different way, which goes back to Plato: that the soul is precisely other than the body, as in the common expression ‘body and soul’, and is some kind of disembodied mental, and above all, moral agent, which survives the body at death. But none of this has anything to do with the Buddha’s position. He was opposing the Upaniṣadic theory of the soul. In the Upaniṣads the soul, atman, is opposed to both the body and the mindOnce we see what the Buddha was arguing against, we realise that it was something very few Westerners have ever believed in and most have never even heard of. He was refusing to accept that a person had an unchanging essence. Moreover, since he was interested in how rather than what, he was not so much saying that people are made of such and such components, and the soul is not among them, as that people function in such and such ways, and to explain their functioning there is no need to posit a soul. The approach is pragmatic, not purely theoretical. Of course the Buddha claims that his pragmatism will work because it is based on correct assumptions, so people are bound sooner or later to discuss these assumptions and thus will easily slip back into theorising and ontology”¹⁶

This example warns us against the dangers of presenting the Buddha’s teaching divorced from its Indian background and thus from the context that made it meaningful.

Another similarly problematic area is the modern use of the term ‘Buddhism’. The term ‘Buddhism’ or a direct equivalent is not found anywhere in the Nikāyas. Indeed, Smith points out that the earliest use of the term is found in the West when in 1801 Isaac Schmidt wrote about ‘Boudhism’¹⁷. The introduction of all religious ‘isms’ came in the nineteenth century when religion became reified as a concept. However, when one tries to identify exactly what Buddhism *is*, then it is virtually impossible to define an essence, for the term could refer to the many different forms of the tradition, to all the lives of people who have lived under the name of Buddhism, to the history of the tradition, and to the personal unseen faith that prompts an individual’s conduct. Similarly, we cannot be guided by

¹⁶Richard Gombrich, *How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings* (London, Althone Press, 1990), p.15.

¹⁷Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, p.61. See also Philip Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988), who charts the effect of the discovery of Buddhism on Victorian Britain, and how this played a seminal role in “the development of a contemporary Western religious pluralism.” (p.ix)

Buddhist's own 'self-definition': "We cannot decide to call Buddhism whatever the Buddhists themselves have called that for, as we have seen, they have been innocent of such a concept."¹⁸

A similar point is made by Cabezón in his discussion of the discipline of Buddhist studies:

"Buddhism is itself an artificial construct whose apparent unity and solidity begins to crumble almost immediately upon analysis. Is Buddhism text-based doctrine or behaviour-based praxis? Is it what the clergy does or what lay people do? What was done then or what is done now? What happens in Tibet or Japan? Of course, it is all of these things, but that is tantamount to admitting the multivalent character of our subject matter. To say that we all work on Buddhism is not to point the finger at similarity but at difference."¹⁹

What is the relevance of this discussion for the present thesis? Firstly it demonstrates the naivety of supposing that one can discover an ancient Buddhist attitude towards the modern inter-faith debate as though the framework of the debate is universal and ageless, and different faith traditions can be simply 'slotted in' to the discussion: "one of the more serious shortcomings of the current methodological debate is surely its failure to take on board the full significance of the fact that someone brought up in the classical intellectual traditions of, say, India would inevitably conceive of and analyse the whole matter in rather different terms."²⁰ Indeed, the very attempt to study an Indian tradition from the alien frameworks of a Western tradition can lead to anachronisms and distortions:

"It is, perhaps, almost commonplace now to point out that there is no precise word for (and hence no concept of) 'religion' in Sanskrit and other Indian languages, or that many of the difficulties associated with a term such as *nirvāṇa* simply disappear when we cease to try to force it into one neat Western metaphysical pigeonhole."²¹

In the specific case of Buddhism, examples of such difficulties are provided by Gombrich²² in his study of thought and practice of Theravāda Buddhism. He explains that as early as 1887, the Pali translator Rhys-Davids noted certain

¹⁸Gethin, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening*, p.48.

¹⁹José Cabezón, "Buddhist Studies as a Discipline and the Role of Theory" in *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 18, 1995, pp. 231-268, p. 240.

²⁰Rupert Gethin, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening*, p.2.

²¹Ibid. See also E.J.Sharpe, *Understanding Religion* (London, Duckworth, 1983), pp.43-4.

²²Richard Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo*, (London, Routledge Kegan Paul, 1988).

significant differences between Christianity and Buddhism in the way that religion is understood:

“Before comparing the numbers of Christians and Buddhists, it is necessary to decide, not only what Christianity is, and what is Buddhism; but also, as regards Buddhists, whether a firm belief in one religion should or should not, as far as statistics are concerned, be nullified by an equally firm belief in another.”²³

Taking up this point in the present, Gombrich explains that for an Indian Buddhist, ‘religion’ means something different to what it might perhaps mean for a British Christian. For example, in our Western culture, the concept of God seems inextricably linked with our notion of ‘religion’. For an Eastern Buddhist, however, gods can have nothing to do with religion, but are just part and parcel of a super-human power structure:

“For Buddhists, religion is purely a matter of understanding, and practising the Dhamma, understanding and practice which constitute progress towards salvation. They conceive salvation — or liberation to use a more Indian term — as the total eradication of greed, hatred or delusion. To attain it is open to any human being ...”²⁴

Buddhists who worship gods are not considered as syncretistic, for they do not expect these beings to bring them to nibbāna. Gombrich makes the parallel with the Western issues of belief in ghosts, astrology and other such supernatural considerations; not all beliefs about supernatural things are ‘religious’, and many Christians hold beliefs that are not derived from Christianity. The only difference between the Buddhist and Christian cultures in this respect is where they draw the line between what is religious and what is not. Another difference that is particularly pertinent to the ‘inter-faith’ debate is that Buddhists not only accept non-Buddhist, ‘supernatural’ beliefs, but in some cases accept beliefs from other religious traditions in addition to their own. They are said to worship “‘Hindu’ gods in Sri Lanka, while in the Far East, Japanese Buddhists are also Shintoists and Chinese Buddhists were also Confucianists or Taoists, or even adherents of all three religions.”²⁵

Gombrich draws a distinction between soteriology and ‘communal religion’. He argues that the issue of soteriology — concerned with the question

²³Rhys-Davids, *Buddhism: Being a sketch of the life and teachings of Gautama, the Buddha*, (London, SPCK, 1887).

²⁴Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, p.23.

²⁵Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, p.25

‘What must I do to be saved’ — was the prime concern of the Buddha’s teaching. Communal religion, however, is primarily concerned with the issue of how to order society and solemnises patterns of action. Gombrich argues that the balance between these two factors can vary enormously between different religions. In the case of Buddhism, the Buddha was so much concerned with the soteriology aspect that he focused very little on worldly concerns and societal norms: “for Buddhists communal religion necessarily includes any attempt to better one’s lot in this life by recourse to magic or the intervention of gods.”²⁶ Only those who join the Sangha of monks are expected to renounce the wider societal norms. Thus to be a Buddhist ‘layman’ might involve belief in various different rituals and spirits, for example, that have nothing to do with ‘Buddhism’. This contrasts dramatically with the Western idea of what it means to be a Christian layman; for example, a Christian layman would have a Christian wedding, whereas a Buddhist layman could have a Hindu wedding without inconsistency or incongruity. This is partly because Theravāda Buddhism has a much narrower view of what constitutes religion than the Christian, “so it is even more obvious in their case that they need systems of thought and action to cope with life in the world.”²⁷ This state of affairs led to a much ‘freer’ attitude towards other religions in traditional Buddhist countries:

“The classical Indian concept — a norm of communal religion — was that it was the duty of a layman to respect and even materially support all holy men, of whatever ‘path’, who presented themselves ...A holy man, such as a Buddhist monk, could claim disciples as followers of his ‘way’, but that could not in practice preclude multiple allegiance, and the boundary between Buddhist and non-Buddhist laity must have been a hard one to trace.”²⁸

All these factors combine to mean that the Western understanding of religions as distinct and mutually exclusive entities does not sit easily with the ancient Buddhist traditions. The tendency of scholars educated in the Western academic and philosophical tradition to import and impose categories of understanding onto ‘Eastern’ cultures is the subject of continuing debate. One protagonist in this arena is Edward Said, who in his book, *Orientalism*, argues that the study of Eastern cultures is much more influenced by Western philosophical sources than by the actual Eastern sources that they claim to represent: “Orientalist discourse is a system of representations which is primarily embedded in European

²⁶Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, p.26.

²⁷Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, p.24.

²⁸Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, p.29.

culture.”²⁹ This point is taken up by Philip Almond, who argues that ‘Western’ studies of Buddhism tend to tell us as much about the culture from which they are written as they do about the cultures which they investigate:

““Victorian interpretations of Buddhism, whether of its founder, its doctrines, its ethics, its social practices, or its truth and value, in constructing Buddhism, reveal the world in which such constructing took place ... Discourse about Buddhism provides a mirror in which is reflected an image not only of the Orient, but of the Victorian world also.”³⁰

An example of the influence of contemporary European academic fashions on the way Buddhism is studied and presented is found in the work of Rhys Davids. Rhys Davids dedicated much of his life’s work to translating Pali texts and rendering Buddhist texts accessible to English speaking readers. His translations are still used in the field of Buddhist studies. His methodology was a historicist approach, typical of nineteenth century European and American scholarship: “This historicism aimed to rescue texts from conditions of misunderstanding and reveal their objective meaning for the first time by applying the critical methods of ‘scientific history’ which could disclose the intentions of their author.”³¹ For example, in his biography of the Buddha, Rhys Davids tended to focus on the original texts of the three Pali Piṭakas, and ignore later translations, commentaries or versions of the Buddha’s biography within the Buddhist tradition. Hallisey describes the reasoning behind this understanding and demonstrates how it contributed to the current tendency in Buddhist studies to see the Pali Canon as more authoritative than later texts:

“In this view, commentaries and translations were not the record of the growing understanding of a text, of the accumulation of evolving interpretation over the centuries; instead they were signposts for those in the present to recover accurately the meaning that had already been promulgated in the past. They were instrumentally valuable, but were without interest in their own right.... the self-presentation of these commentaries and translations, in which attention is drawn away from the present to the past, encourages their users to approach them as

²⁹Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978), p.21-2.

³⁰Philip C. Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 5-6.

³¹Charles Hallisey: “Roads Taken and Not Taken in the Study of Theravāda Buddhism” in Donald S. Jr. Lopez (ed.), *Curators of the Buddha, The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 31-61, p.32.

provisional entrees to the ‘more authoritative’ texts of the Pali canon. ... The effects of this elective affinity fell quickly into place, as can be seen in almost every program of Buddhist Studies in European and North American universities. The study of the Theravāda became equated with the study of the Pali canon, and it is still common for a student to finish a graduate program in Buddhist Studies without ever having read a Theravādin commentarial text.”³²

Hallisey makes the further interesting point that Rhys Davids portrayed Buddhism as largely free from ritual, and suggests that this is because non-European cultures provided Europeans with the chance to “cultivate and enlarge an imagined vision of human life” as an alternative to what was currently in Europe: “The idea of early Buddhism was used in just this way: its definition as an agnostic, rationalist, ethical movement inspired those Europeans anxious to find alternatives to religion as a foundation for morality in everyday life”³³ This is a point taken up by Gombrich who explains that, in his presentation of Buddhism, Rhys Davids “naturally stressed the rationalist elements of Buddhism, because they formed the most striking contrast both to Christian, and to other Indian traditions.”³⁴

Some scholars have objected to the apparent monopoly of Western scholars on the study of religion, and argue that more opportunity should be given to ‘Eastern’ scholars to describe their own traditions. Frank Whaling is one such example. Whaling cites with approval Edward Said who argues for the importance of recognising different traditions within their own native contexts before engaging in comparative exercises: “firstly we should recognise, conceptualise and genuinely realise the self-awareness of different cultures, histories, traditions, societies, races and religions, but ... secondly we should situate them within one human reality.”³⁵ Whaling illustrates his point by citing some scholars from an Indian/non-Western background who have expressed dissatisfaction with the Western approaches to their native religious traditions. One such example is Coomaraswamy, who in his book *Hinduism and Buddhism* (1943) argued that Buddhism was poorly understood and translated by Western scholarship. Coomaraswamy wrote of the

³²Hallisey, “Roads Taken and Not Taken”, pp.43-4.

³³Hallisey, “Roads Taken and Not Taken”, p.45. See also Robert H. Sharf: “The Zen of Japanese Nationalism” in *Curators of the Buddha*, pp. 107-161, p.123.

³⁴Richard Gombrich, *Buddhist Precept and Practice: Traditional Buddhism in the Highlands of Ceylon* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1971), p.61.

³⁵Frank Whaling, *Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion: Volume One: The Humanities* (Berlin, New York and Amsterdam, Mouton, 1984), p.397, reporting Edward Said, *Orientalism*.

intuition behind Indian experience of the unity of all life, and thus saw Indian philosophy as “part of a perennial philosophy embodying universal truths exclusive to no one tradition or period.”³⁶ This provides just one example of an area where Indian cultural presuppositions differ from the Western conception of different religions as forwarding competing and mutually exclusive truth claims. It is a sentiment that is echoed by another Eastern scholar, D. T. Suzuki: “Buddhism and Christianity and all other religious beliefs are not more than variations of one single faith, deeply embedded in the human soul.”³⁷

Whaling analyses the thought of various non-western scholars and identifies some common responses to Western approaches. Firstly, commenting on Western approaches to their own traditions, the non-western scholars identified a need for Westerners to supplement their understanding of other traditions by learning from those within the traditions: “While generally not disapproving of the work of Western scholars, their suggestion is that this work needs to be supplemented by that of scholars belonging to the traditions themselves ... Western cultural presuppositions make it less easy for Westerners to understand the language and world-view of the people concerned.”³⁸ Secondly, Whaling identified a certain unease amongst non-western scholars about the epistemological presuppositions that underpin the methodological approach of Western scholars of religion:

“Their feeling is ... that the Western tendency to stress empirical and rational categories derived from a science-based model makes it less easy for Western scholars to understand what Vedānta means to a Hindu, Sūfism to a Muslim, Zen to a Buddhist, or ancestor worship to an African.”³⁹

However, this issue is made more complicated by the fact that some of the Eastern scholars that Whaling cites have themselves been strongly influenced by ‘Western’ methodologies. For example, we have seen how Whaling cites D.T. Suzuki as an example of an ‘Eastern’ scholar who challenges the Western academic conception of Buddhism. Indeed, Suzuki was largely responsible for introducing Zen Buddhism to the West. However, in his paper on D.T. Suzuki, Robert Sharf explains that, ironically, Suzuki and others who presented Zen to the West were in fact products of a Western academic tradition:

³⁶Coomaraswamy, *Hinduism and Buddhism* (1971), p.49; cited from Frank Whaling, *Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion*, p.399.

³⁷D. T. Suzuki, 1921 vol 1 156, cited from Whaling, *Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion*, p. 410.

³⁸Whaling, *Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion*, p. 426.

³⁹Ibid.

“The men most responsible for laying the intellectual foundation for Zen in the West did not emerge from traditional Zen monastic settings. Rather, they were educated proponents of post-Meiji New Buddhism, concerned with rendering Buddhism and Zen culturally and intellectually respectable. ... Moreover, many of the Japanese proponents of Zen in the West were university graduates who successfully pursued academic careers in their own country. The universities in which they were trained and later taught were modelled on systems largely imported from the West. As students they were introduced to Western secular thought in general and European philosophy in particular, and as teachers they actively sought to formulate a Japanese response to the challenge posed by Western culture, science and technology.”⁴⁰

He explains that these figures in fact had marginal status within the Zen establishment, and failed to recognise the influence of Western traditions on their work: “Asian apologists, convinced that Zen was making significant inroads in the West, failed to recognise the degree to which Zen was “theraputized” by European and American enthusiasts, rendering Zen, from a Buddhist point of view, part of the problem rather than the solution.”⁴¹

This process of ‘insidious’ Western influence was not merely confined to Buddhism. At the turn of the century in the many ‘dialogues’ that took place between Western (mainly Christian) scholars and ‘representatives’ of Asian traditions, these Asian ‘representatives’ were “invariably the products of European style educations, [who] formulated their understandings of their respective traditions in a European intellectual context.”⁴² Sharf cites ‘Hindu’ thinkers such as Rammohan Roy and Vivekananda, as well as the Theravāda Buddhist Dhammapala (who represented Buddhism at the world parliament of religions in 1893) as examples of such individuals:

““These Western-educated Asian intellectuals were all too ready to present their own spiritual heritages as paragons of enlightened, scientific, rational, humanistic, and universal religious creeds grounded in the direct experience of divine truth. The modern notion of religion as an appropriate cross-cultural object of scholarly investigation emerged directly out of this complex dialogue, in which Western

⁴⁰Robert H. Sharf, “The Zen of Japanese Nationalism” in *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism*, ed. Lopez (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 136.

⁴¹Sharf, “The Zen of Japanese Nationalism”, p.140.

⁴²Sharf, “The Zen of Japanese Nationalism”, p.142.

investigators were ever encouraged to find their own romanticised notion of true or essential religion mirrored back to them by their Asian protégés. This raises serious questions as to the very foundation of the secular study of comparative religion in the West ...”⁴³

In Buddhism this process of the ‘Westernisation’ of Buddhism has sometimes been called ‘Protestant Buddhism’. This phrase was coined by Obeyesekere, who defined ‘Protestant Buddhism’ in two ways: “(a) many of its norms and organisational forms are historical derivatives from Protestant Christianity. (b) More importantly, from the contemporary point of view, it is a protest *against* Christianity and its associated Western political dominance prior to independence”⁴⁴ R.S. Copleston, the Anglican bishop of Colombo in 1892 wrote of how he saw two Buddhisms in Sri Lanka; one was the ‘old Buddhism of the past centuries’ and the other, a “new revival, very self-conscious and artificial” which “aims indeed only at reviving what Buddhism always professed to be, but which has been influenced, in its estimate of that profession, very largely by Europeans.”⁴⁵

Gombrich explains how this movement was not confined to Sri Lanka and was caused by the influence of missionaries from the West and the rise of the middle classes in Sri Lanka.⁴⁶ As Sharf indicated, one of the characteristics of this movement was the presentation of Buddhism as rational and scientific. One eminent example of this sort of approach is Professor Jayatilleke (whose work is quoted later in this thesis). Gombrich explains how in the 1960’s Jayatilleke was seen by middle-class Sinhalese Buddhists as the leading Buddhist intellectual of the time: “He applied his considerable learning, intelligence and expository powers to proving that every major intellectual development in the modern world was anticipated by the Buddha.”⁴⁷

⁴³Sharf, “The Zen of Japanese Nationalism”, p.143.

⁴⁴ G. Obeyesekere, “Religious Symbolism and Political Change in Ceylon” in ed. Ganananath Obeyesekere, Frank Reynolds, Bardwell L. Smith, *The Two Wheels of Dhamma: Essays on the Theravāda Tradition in India and Ceylon* (Pennsylvania, Chambersburg, 1972), pp. 58-78, p.62. See also Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obeyesekere, *Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka* (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1988), pp. 202-240.

⁴⁵R.S. Copleston, *Buddhism Primitive and Present in Magadha and Ceylon* (London, Longmans, Green & co., 1892), p.461.

⁴⁶Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, pp. 182 ff. Gombrich provides some very interesting examples of how, under the influence of Western missionaries, Buddhists began to change their attitudes towards debating with other religions, going from a position of great tolerance to a tendency to argue back with a mirror-image vigour.

⁴⁷Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, p.183.

What is the relevance of the above discussion for this thesis? Firstly, it suggests that it may be naive to suppose that simply by looking at the Pali Nikāyas one can find a ‘Buddhist attitude towards other religions’. It would perhaps be more correct to say that this thesis is a Western academic interpretation of what Buddha (itself a concept strongly influenced by Western interpretations) might have thought. For as we have seen in the discussion above, the focus on the Pali Nikāyas, and even the notions of Buddhism and inter-faith dialogue, are the product of a certain history, a particular branch of the Western intellectual tradition.

Texts and Meanings.

We have examined some examples of how the agenda of this thesis and the subject matter it deals with is influenced by particular academic traditions. This raises further questions. Is it ever possible to have some idea of how the Buddha actually viewed other traditions, or is this a hopeless enterprise, the Buddha’s original intentions being forever buried under year upon year, level upon level, of reinterpretation and recontextualisation? This relates to a broader issue when reading any text: can any text have an ‘original meaning’, and if so, how is it accessed? How much meaning is in the text, and how much comes from the reader’s background or expectations?

In his paper on the discipline of Buddhist Studies, Cabezón presents the extremes to both sides of this debate. On the one side, there is what he describes as the ‘positivist’ view. On this view, it is possible to find the original meaning of a text: “it maintains that the purpose of scholarly textual investigation ... is to reconstruct the original text (there is *only one* best reconstruction): to restore it and to contextualize it historically to the point where the author’s original intention can be gleaned. To reconstitute the text in this way is to make it available in a neutral, untampered-with and pristine fashion.”⁴⁸ The other extreme Cabezón describes as ‘interpretivism’. On this view, every element of scholarship contains an element of interpretation:

“There is, for the interpretivist, no escape from subjective contamination, no preinterpretive moment. Interpretivists eschew the notion that there is a single achievable text that represents the author’s original intention. A scholar’s signature must appear not only on the

⁴⁸Cabezón, “Buddhist Studies as a Discipline and the Role of Theory”, *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies*, 18, 1995, pp.245-6.

title page, but throughout the entire work through the manifest exposition of his or her subjectivity.”⁴⁹

A current example of an interpretivist approach is provided by Andrew Tuck. In his book *Comparative Philosophy and the Philosophy of Scholarship*, he considers the philosophical presuppositions behind comparative scholarship. He warns of the danger of imposing one’s own cultural preoccupations on ancient texts and supposing that these texts are in fact addressing the same issues:

“When one says (with a tone of discovery, rather than construction) that two philosophers from separate traditions are “saying the same thing”, “have the same position”, or are attempting to “solve the same problem”, one edges close to the belief that philosophical problems are universal, perennial puzzles with which all men, regardless of historical period or culture, are engaged, and that these eternal problems can be expressed in any language and at any time.”⁵⁰

This is the view, then, that despite cultural and linguistic differences between thinkers from different times and from different backgrounds, the issues that they are confronted with are basically the same. On this view, cultural or linguistic differences are ‘cosmetic’, and thus comparative projects are wholly appropriate. This kind of view is forwarded by Griffiths, who argues that “Philosophy is a trans-cultural human activity, which in all essentials operates within the same conventions and by the same norms in all cultures. These are, broadly speaking, the conventions and norms which demarcate what in the West has sometimes been called rationality.”⁵¹ From our brief survey of the history of the terms ‘religion’ and ‘Buddhism’ it is clear that the inter-faith debate as we now know it is clearly not a universal or perennial puzzle, so there is some validity in Tuck’s warning for the present project. Although, as we shall presently see, the Buddha did pass judgement on the salvific effectiveness of other groups that he was confronted with, even this situation was quite different from the contemporary inter-faith debate. This debate is strongly influenced by concepts such as the notion of ‘religious’ as discrete entities, somehow in competition with each other, concepts which were not current in the Buddha’s day. However, it is also the case that some of the problems that the Buddha addresses are problems that we are

⁴⁹Ibid., pp.247-8. See also Jerome Mc Gann, *The Textual Condition* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1991).

⁵⁰Andrew Tuck, *Comparative Philosophy and the Philosophy of Scholarship: on the Western interpretation of Nāgārjuna* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990), p.11.

⁵¹Paul J. Griffiths, *On Being Mindless: Buddhist meditation and the mind-body problem*. (Illinois, Open Court, 1986), p.xvii.

faced with today. In particular, the existence of suffering and how to make it cease is a conundrum that connects us to all other times and cultures, although how suffering manifests itself and what counts as suffering may vary according to cultural and historical contexts. One could argue then, that this provides a universal framework that gives the Buddha's teaching meaning for a twentieth century audience.

Tuck argues that it is more helpful to recognise that one is interpreting an ancient text from a Western perspective, rather than getting answers to universal questions: "the kind of comparison that makes minimal claims for itself allows greater intelligibility of interpretation: it gives us all we can have, and that is no small thing."⁵² Tuck eschews the idea that one can find an 'objective' interpretation of a text, undistorted by the reader's cultural presuppositions. He argues that this quest for objectivity is common in comparative religion, and is often accompanied by the notion that one must immerse oneself in the culture from which a particular text arises in order truly to understand it. Tuck cites the following quote as an example of such philosophy:

"Why is it so important to be able to see Hinduism through Hindu eyes, to see the tradition from the inside? For one thing, doing so is a prophylactic against superimposing alien and inappropriate conceptualisations. But more profoundly, the empathetic identification is prerequisite to seeing meaning in the objects of study."⁵³

Tuck finds the idea just outlined "inherently problematic" for it falsely assumes that one can shed one's cultural presuppositions at will:

"There are no non-culture-specific languages in which to write, or unconditioned perspectives from which to view, another age or culture ... While trying to counter the subjectivist excesses of comparative scholarship, textual objectivists become guilty of a different kind of methodological excess."⁵⁴

Tuck cites thinkers such as Wittgenstein, Quine, Davidson, Sellars and Kuhn to question the notion that it is possible to find an objective meaning or truth in a text, and to question the coherence of philosophical essentialism. He goes on to cite the arguments of textualists such as Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, Gadamer

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Richard H. Robinson, "Comments on 'Non-Western Studies: The Religious Approach' by Wilfred Cantwell Smith", *A Report on an invitational Conference on the Study of Religion in the State University*, New Haven: the Society for Religion in Higher Education, nd. (Conference held Oct 23-25 1964), p.64.

⁵⁴Tuck, *Comparative Philosophy*, p.12.

and Rorty that “the notions of literal meaning and truth as representation” are “remnants of antique theoretical premises.”⁵⁵ It is not the place here to embark in detail upon such a debate. However, Tuck’s point that any reader brings his or her own cultural presuppositions to his or her interpretation of a text is a sound one. It is surely impossible to shed one’s cultural skin in order to gain an ‘objective’ interpretation of a text:

“That scholars in an interpretive field like Indian philosophical studies have attempted to deny their own creative input and to claim that their efforts are totally ‘objective’ reveals a curious combination of excessive modesty, hubris, and ignorance (or less insultingly, innocence.)”⁵⁶

A methodology that takes this into account will acknowledge the inevitable creative process of interpretation that accompanies any reading of a text:

“If we are to reject the idea that meaning lies hidden beneath the surface of a text, then we have to see the act of reading as an enterprise that involves the context of the reader as much as that of the text. Readers of Sanskrit texts, like readers of European novels, must employ their personal and cultural perspectives if they are to find what they read intelligible. This act of productive understanding — isogesis — is an integral part of the interpretive process, and the putative objectivism of many scholars in Indian studies is only a vain attempt to deny the phenomenon.”⁵⁷

The discussion earlier in this chapter about Western approaches to the study of Buddhism to some extent supports Tuck’s point insofar as it is clear that what is ‘found’ in Buddhist sources is to some degree determined by the hopes or expectations of the observer. However, the very fact that the history of Western influence can be traced and seen as a somewhat unfaithful representation of Buddhist sources, suggests that it may be possible to at least get *closer* to, for example, the Buddha’s intentions in his teachings. There may not be a final objective meaning of a text but it does not follow that some readings are less distorted by the preconceptions of the reader than others. For example, earlier in this chapter, there was a quotation from Gombrich which contrasted Western connotations of the word ‘soul’ with the Upaniṣadic understanding of the term ‘atman’ which the Buddha denied. The reader who understands that the Buddha was arguing against this Upaniṣadic understanding is surely closer to the original

⁵⁵Tuck, *Comparative Philosophy*, p.11.

⁵⁶Tuck, *Comparative Philosophy*, p.15.

⁵⁷Tuck, *Comparative Philosophy*, p.16.

teaching of the Buddha than a reader who fails to put his teaching in its Indian context and thinks the Buddha is denying the notion of 'soul' as it is presented in the Christian cultural tradition.

Elsewhere, Gombrich provides another argument in support of legitimacy of the pursuit of original contextual meanings. He describes how, in 1837 James Prinsep translated one of Asoka's edicts as condoning the death penalty. However, in 1975 K.R. Norman identified a mistake in this translation, and showed that the edict referred not to the death penalty (which had been abolished), but to flogging.⁵⁸ Gombrich argues that this demonstrates that there is a final, true meaning to the text in question:

"The criminals being punished by Asoka's officials can have been in no doubt that the text of his edict had an objective meaning: for those accused the emperor's meaning was absolute. Joking apart, however, it is not enough to say that Norman provided a new interpretation of the text: he *discovered* its meaning."⁵⁹

This example, according to Gombrich, demonstrates the legitimacy of the search for original meanings:

"An important part of the history of a religion is of course how it interprets its own tradition, including its textual tradition. But that does not alter the fact that texts had specific meanings to their original authors, and moreover, since we can assume that those authors were competent communicators, to their original audiences. To uncover those original meanings is not only a legitimate task for the historian, it is of the greatest historical interest."⁶⁰

In maintaining that the quest for the original meaning of the Buddha's teachings requires knowledge of "what cultural knowledge and presuppositions he shared with his audience"⁶¹, Gombrich is making just the sort of methodological claim that, as we have seen, Tuck objects to. For Tuck believes that such an approach involves the 'problematic' notion that one can shed one's own cultural skin in order to temporarily wear somebody else's.

⁵⁸K.R. Norman, "Aśoka and Capital Punishment: notes on a portion of Aśoka's fourth pillar edict, with an appendix on the accusative absolute construction.", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1, 1975, pp.16-24.

⁵⁹Gombrich, "The Buddha's Book of Genesis?", *Indo-Iranian Journal* 35, 1992, pp. 159-178, p.159.

⁶⁰Gombrich, "The Buddha's Book of Genesis?", p.160.

⁶¹Gombrich, "The Buddha's Book of Genesis?", pp.161-2.

As Cabezón points out, such arguments could be endless and there will not necessarily ever be scholarly consensus on the issues of, for example, scholarly intention. However, such debates are nevertheless useful: “the point of critical dialogue on questions of method is not of course to reach final an universal consensus. Rather, it is to converse, and in so doing to clarify our own and others’ positions on important issues, *for* ourselves and others.”⁶²

Indeed, such a debate may help to clarify the methodological position taken in this thesis. Both Gombrich (representing a positivist) and Tuck (representing an interpretivist) make some compelling points. In this thesis, however, my methodological approach follows Gombrich's line rather than Tuck's. Whilst I agree that it is not possible to read a text without *some* subjective, interpretive input and thus to discover an ‘objective’ meaning, I think Gombrich is right in suggesting that one is able to get closer to an original, or rather, ‘intended’ meaning by attempting to reconstruct the original context of a text as far as is possible.

This thesis is located firmly within the sort of European/North American academic tradition of Buddhist Studies that Hallisey describes above. It focuses on the Pali Canon as its ‘original’ source, and very little upon later commentaries, except where they elucidate issues within the Nikāyas themselves. Similarly, my approach is philosophical and rationalist, focusing very little on practice or ritual within Buddhism, and favouring philosophy over phenomenology. There may be various pitfalls and shortcomings to this approach, and these are all ongoing problematic concerns which I recognise. Instead, I hope it will suffice to have explained my method of approach in this thesis and to acknowledge my awareness that the comparative project is prone to various methodological pitfalls. Since it is inevitable that any reader of a text brings a certain level of sympathy and bias to their reading, it is perhaps relevant to acknowledge that this thesis is written by a practising ‘Buddhist’ from a standpoint that is sympathetic to the Buddhist tradition.

I have deliberately chosen the pluralistic hypothesis of John Hick in order to provide one approach to ancient Buddhist texts. It may well be the case that in the Buddha’s time there was no concept of ‘religions’ as discrete and mutually exclusive entities, and thus the factors that motivated Hick’s hypothesis did not exist in the same form. However, the problem undoubtedly exists now that there

⁶²Cabezón, “Buddhist Studies as a Discipline and the Role of Theory”. p.261.

are many rival accounts of how one can attain liberation (and, of course, rival accounts of what liberation *is*). Whilst this issue is not seen in the same terms in the Nikāya texts considered in this thesis, nevertheless the Buddha is occupied with the question of what one must do to be liberated. Part of his teaching involves his encounters with those individuals or groups who follow different courses of action and conduct. His response to such groups can show us both how he understood his own path to liberation, and how he saw other teachings as relating to it. So whilst the modern-day context of inter-faith debate is thoroughly different from that of the Nikāyas, nevertheless, there does seem to be a certain connection in the question of how liberation is attained. The Buddha was faced with rival teachings, rival claims about how liberation is attained, and this is the same basic problem that Hick attempts to deal with, even though he may be approaching the question from a different standpoint and from a different motivation. It seems legitimate to look at the Buddha's teaching for a perspective on the inter-faith debate because, after all, it is with the modern day that we are concerned. A modern practitioner of the Buddha's teachings is faced with a plethora of other religious teachings that may contradict his own, and is thus forced to take some position on the issue, even if it is to reject the terms of the debate.

We have already considered the difficulties with using the terms 'Buddhism' and 'Buddhist' when these were not used by the Buddha himself but are relatively recent Western philosophical concepts, part of the process of the reification of religions that Cantwell Smith so laments. For this reason I have chosen to focus entirely on the Pali Nikāyas as the 'Buddhist' source for this thesis. Rather than claiming to find a "Buddhist attitude to other religions", it is more accurate for me to describe my project as an attempt to discover how the Buddha viewed other groups that he encountered as recorded in the Nikāyas. To clarify the Buddha's position, it will also be necessary to consider the philosophy that underpins his teachings.

The analysis of Hick's hypothesis provides both the justification for this project and a method of approach. As I will show in chapter one, Hick sees his hypothesis as a preferable alternative between two positions. The first, he characterises as the belief that all religious experience is "*in toto* delusory", and the second as "the dogmatic view that it is all delusory except that of one's own tradition."⁶³ The third alternative that he offers is the view that the different world faiths "constitute different ways of experiencing, conceiving and living in relation

⁶³Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 235.

to an ultimate divine Reality which transcends all our varied visions of it.”⁶⁴ Hick sees this hypothesis as a “best explanation ... from a religious point of view, of the facts of the history of religions.”⁶⁵, because it preserves the in-principled truth of religious claims, whilst allowing the co-existence of different truth claims. As we will see (below, p. 71), Hick admits that his hypothesis requires a deviation from the self-understanding of the different religious traditions, but argues that this does not detract from the coherence of his hypothesis.

This is one of the claims that will be evaluated in this thesis. After an exposition of certain of the Buddha's teachings, it will be argued that Hick denies Buddhist self-understanding to such an extent as to completely undermine the Buddha's teaching. He therefore in effect 'excludes' the Buddha's teaching from inclusion in his hypothesis, by altering it to such an extent that it is no longer recognisable. Using the Buddha's teachings and responses to other groups in the Nikāyas, I will then attempt to consider Hick's hypothesis from a 'Buddhist' perspective. Finally I will argue that the Buddha's way of approaching different 'soteriological traditions' is more coherent than Hick's.

Hick's hypothesis helps to structure my approach to this issue in various ways. For example, Hick is ultimately concerned with the question of salvation/liberation — it is therefore necessary to consider how the Buddha appeared to view liberation. Similarly, Hick is concerned with the relationship between religious views and doctrines and salvation/liberation, so part of this thesis will be devoted to the Buddha's attitude towards views and how they relate to the path to liberation.

The Structure of the Thesis.

The thesis will be structured as follows: chapter one will provide an exposition of Hick's thought, culminating in a presentation of his Post-Copernican pluralistic hypothesis. This will 'set the scene' for the rest of the thesis by showing how Hick sees Buddhism as fitting into his hypothesis. Chapters two to five will deal exclusively with material based upon the Nikāyas.

In chapter two I endeavour to provide a very brief overview of the Buddha's teaching, and try to answer the question of 'what does it mean to be

⁶⁴Ibid.

⁶⁵Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, p.51.

liberated according to the Buddha?’ by considering the descriptions of the goal of nibbāna and the path to its attainment.

In chapter three, the qualities of the ‘four types of person’ (*ariyasāvaka*) who are destined to attain liberation will be contrasted with the ordinary person, the *puthujjana*. This will thus show us the criteria for liberation as defined by the Buddha, which will provide a point of comparison with Hick’s thesis.

In chapter four the relationship between views and liberation will be considered in some length. This will involve an exploration of the concept of belief and its relationship to practice according to the Nikāya tradition in an attempt to understand whether one has to consciously accept Buddhist truth-claims to gain liberation.

Chapter five will focus on the occasions in the Nikāyas where the Buddha’s meetings with other groups or individuals are reported. The first section of Chapter Five will focus on the Buddha’s more generalised comments about other views, or about views in general, whereas the second will look at specific named ‘others’ that the Buddha encounters.

Finally, in chapter six, there will be a critical analysis of Hick’s Post-Copernican Pluralistic hypothesis. It will be criticised firstly on the grounds of its internal coherence, and secondly from an ‘external’, ‘Buddhist’ perspective. Finally it will be argued that, from this ‘Buddhist’ perspective, there is no ‘need’ for Hick’s hypothesis, for the Buddha already espouses a coherent account of other ‘religions’ in the Nikāyas.

This thesis may provide an original contribution to the contemporary inter-faith debate on two main grounds. Firstly, Hick’s hypothesis and a Buddhist approach to the question of other religions have not previously been considered together in such depth. A Buddhist critique of religious pluralism has been provided by Masao Abe, but he writes from the perspective of the Zen tradition and does not explicitly engage with Hick’s hypothesis.⁶⁶ In the same volume, John Cobb Jr. and Padmasiri De Silva (writing from a Theravādin standpoint) provide criticisms of religious pluralism from a Buddhist perspective⁶⁷. Unlike the present thesis, neither root their criticism in the Pali Nikāyas or respond directly to Hick’s hypothesis. In this respect, then, it is hoped that this thesis covers original ground.

⁶⁶Masao Abe, “A Dynamic Unity in Religious Pluralism: A Proposal from the Buddhist Point of View”, in Hick and Askari, ed. *The Experience of Religious Diversity* (Aldershot, Gower, 1985). Another of Abe’s Zen critiques is found in Paul J. Griffiths (ed.), *Christianity Through Non-Christian Eyes* (New York, Orbis, 1990), pp. 171-180.

⁶⁷John Cobb Jr., “Christian Witness in a Plural World”, pp. 144-162; Padmasiri de Silva, “Religious Pluralism: A Buddhist Perspective”, pp. 131-143.

Secondly this thesis may make an original contribution in its consideration of the Pali Nikāyas in relation to the question of inter-faith relations. Both Richard Hayes and K.N.Jayatilleke have presented works which consider the Buddha's attitude towards other groups as it is presented in the Nikāyas⁶⁸. However, both are relatively short papers; the present thesis represents a more detailed treatment of this theme, and is original in combining this theme with a critique of Hick's hypothesis.

⁶⁸Richard P. Hayes, "Gotama Buddha and Religious Pluralism", in *Journal of Religious Pluralism*, 1, 1991, pp. 65-96. K.N. Jayatilleke, "The Buddhist Attitude to Other Religions", *The Wheel Publication 216* (Kandy, Buddhist Publication Society, 1991). Extracts of this paper are also found in Paul J. Griffiths ed., *Christianity Through Non-Christian Eyes*, pp. 141-153.

SECTION ONE:

JOHN HICK'S PLURALISTIC HYPOTHESIS.

CHAPTER ONE: John Hick's Post-Copernican Pluralistic Hypothesis.

Professor John Hick has recently retired from a long career as a theologian and philosopher of religion. He is perhaps best known for his work on religious pluralism, having developed the thesis that all the great world 'religions' are equally capable of bringing salvation/liberation. This position is best exemplified in his work, *An Interpretation of Religion*, where his thesis is summarised in the following extract:

"I want to explore the pluralistic hypothesis that the great world faiths embody different perceptions and conceptions of, and correspondingly different responses to, the Real from within the major variant ways of being human; and that within each of them the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness is taking place. These traditions are accordingly to be regarded as soteriological 'spaces' within which, or 'ways' along which, men and women can find salvation/liberation/ultimate fulfilment."⁶⁹

Context: The Threefold Typology.

Before embarking on an exposition of Hick's thesis, it is perhaps helpful to look at the context of the debate to which he contributes. In Christian theology, the inter-faith debate has been dominated by the threefold typology of exclusivism, inclusivism and pluralism. Whilst recognising that many different varieties of position can exist within each of these categories, Hick defines exclusivism as the belief that "salvation is confined to Christians, or even more narrowly, in the traditional Catholic dogma, that *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, outside the church there is no salvation."⁷⁰ Hick finds exclusivism unacceptable on the grounds that it provides a picture of a tyrannical God who lacks in compassion insofar as he will condemn to eternal damnation anybody who, through no fault of their own, may not have heard the 'salvific' teachings. Similarly, it condemns those who do not believe in the 'salvific' tradition as the result of their cultural or religious background, which is largely dependent on their place of birth. Secondly, Hick believes that it is self-evident that salvific change occurs in other traditions, a fact

⁶⁹Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p.240.

⁷⁰Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, p. 19.

which exclusivism fails to take account of : “if we mean by salvation an actual salvific change in women and men, then it is ... an observable fact that this is not restricted either to any section of Christianity or Christianity as a whole.”⁷¹ Turning to the category of inclusivism, Hick identifies two forms. Firstly there is the view, accepted by Vatican II and ‘the majority’ of Catholic and Protestant theologians, that salvation does take place within each of the great faith traditions, but where it does occur it is always ‘the work of Christ’. This means that individuals from other faiths can be saved by Christ, but they will not necessarily know or acknowledge the fact⁷². The second form of inclusivism is the view that the salvific work of all the major figures in other religious traditions is ultimately due to Christ — not the historical Jesus, but the “non-historical, or supra-historical, Christ figure or Logos ...who secretly inspired the Buddha, and the writers of the Upanishads ...Muhammad, Guru Nanak, Ramakrishna and many others since.”⁷³ Hick finds the first form of inclusivism implausible and illustrates his criticism with an analogy from medieval astrology. Before Copernicus, the Ptolemaic understanding of the universe saw the earth at the centre of the cosmos, with the sun and other planets revolving around it. Apparent movements of the planets which did not fit with this understanding were explained as ‘epicycles’, small ‘sub-orbits’ that the planets followed as they circled the earth. As more and more of these epicycles were observed, the plausibility of the hypothesis became eroded. Hick believes that the inclusivist position is one such epicycle of a dying theological dogma that needs to be updated.

With regard to the second type of inclusivism, Hick argues that once the idea of a salvific figure is no longer identified with the historical figure of Christ, then it becomes a “name for a world-wide and history-long presence and impact upon human life of the Divine, the Transcendent, the Ultimate, the Real.”⁷⁴ Hick states that, in fact, this is close to the pluralist position that he advocates, because it is referring to the ultimate source of salvation and not pinning it to an exclusive historical manifestation within one particular position.⁷⁵

Hick defines pluralism as the belief that all traditions are different but equally valid and effective paths to salvation. He argues that the three-fold typology does not apply only to salvation, but also to truth claims — different

⁷¹Ibid.

⁷²Karl Rahner introduced the well-known phrase ‘anonymous Christians’ to explain how non-Christians (Rahner focussed on atheists) are to be understood. See K. Rahner, *Theological Investigations* vol. 6 (London, Darton Longman and Todd, 1969), pp. 390-8.

⁷³Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, p. 22.

⁷⁴Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, p. 23.

⁷⁵Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 39.

religious traditions do not only claim that one has to fulfil certain criteria to be saved, but that also that they have a true understanding of reality which, in many cases, conflicts with the narratives presented by others. Hick's critique of the different approaches and his argument for pluralism is applied to both these areas of truth-claims and salvation-claims.

In this chapter, the progress of Hick's thought from conservative Christian theology to the very liberal position of pluralism will be briefly charted, in order to provide a context for his later thought. Hick writes of himself that he has "a habit of noticing flaws in arguments and inconsistencies in accepted belief systems and ...an obsessive respect for facts";⁷⁶ thus to understand his position it is helpful to look at the 'flaws and inconsistencies' that led him to put forward alternative theses. Having established this, Hick's pluralist hypothesis will be analysed in some detail, focusing primarily on *An Interpretation of Religion* and *The Rainbow of Faiths*. I have focused on *An Interpretation of Religion* because Hick presents it as a comprehensive statement of his position, describing it as an:

"attempt to construct a comprehensive hypothesis which takes full account the data and theories of the human sciences but which uses them to show how it is that the response to a transcendent reality has taken the bewildering plurality of forms that history records."⁷⁷

I have also focused on *The Rainbow of Faiths* because Hick wrote it as a response to criticisms of the thesis presented in *An Interpretation of Religion*.⁷⁸

Finally, there will be an exposition of Hick's treatment of Buddhism in these works, and how he fits Buddhist teachings into his pluralistic hypothesis. Hick cites with approval certain key Buddhist doctrines, particularly attitudes towards views⁷⁹, which will be considered closely. This consideration of Hick's understanding of Buddhism and its compatibility with his pluralistic hypothesis will lead in to the main body of this thesis, considering the Buddha's attitude to other teachings and views as demonstrated in the Pali Nikāyas. After this exposition, it will be possible to critically analyse the coherence of Hick's Post Copernican pluralistic hypothesis.

⁷⁶Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism* (London, Macmillan, 1985), p. 1.

⁷⁷ Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 2.

⁷⁸Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths* (London, SCM, 1995).

⁷⁹e.g., the idea of the 'unanswered questions', and the 'parable of the raft', which will be discussed later, p. 146 ff.

The Development of Hick's Thought

Hick began his career as a Christian theological conservative, working first as a Presbyterian minister in Northern England and then teaching philosophy of religion at universities and seminaries in America. At this stage, he believed that salvation came through God's incarnation in Christ, and through his work in theodicy presented an 'Irenaen' thesis that suffering exists to enable individuals to grow and develop⁸⁰. Hick's academic career began in Cambridge University: when Hick moved to take up a professorship in Birmingham University in 1967, various factors presented themselves as 'flaws and inconsistencies' to the arguments of the conservative Christianity he had hitherto espoused. Firstly, Birmingham was — and is — a multicultural city, with a very large immigrant community amongst which all the great world religions are represented. Living in this environment led Hick to rethink his work on theodicy: "I had concluded that any viable Christian theodicy must affirm the ultimate salvation of all God's creatures. How then to reconcile the notion of there being one, and only one, true religion with a belief in God's universal saving activity?"⁸¹

Hick found the doctrine of the incarnation particularly difficult to combine with the notion that *all* God's creatures would be saved, for if it is only through God's incarnation in Christ that one is saved, then individuals from other religions that do not profess Christ as saviour are precluded from salvation. As we shall see presently, this, coupled with various other factors listed below, led Hick to question the uniqueness of God's revelation in Christ, and to develop a pluralistic hypothesis.

In *The Rainbow of Faiths*, Hick identifies three factors which make the problem of how to understand and co-exist with other religious traditions particularly pressing for Christians. Firstly, to a greater extent than ever before, people are better informed about other traditions — there has been "an explosion of information in the West about the religions of the world."⁸² Secondly, the increasing ease of global travel means that many more Westerners have first-hand experiences of other cultures than was the case in the past, and that even in this country, many people are experimenting with 'Eastern' religious techniques such as meditation. Thirdly, this process of increasing global awareness was boosted as a result of post-war immigration: "we are now familiar, in many major cities of the

⁸⁰ Exemplified in John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love* (London, Collins, 1979).

⁸¹ Hick, *God Has Many Names: Britain's new religious pluralism* (London, Macmillan, 1980)

⁸² Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, p. 12.

Western world ...not only with churches and synagogues but also with mosques, gurudwaras, meditation centres, and temples of many kinds; and may have worshippers in these places as neighbours.”⁸³

These physical factors have made the necessity for a theology of other religions more pressing. However, even more significant for Hick was the realisation that he could find no apparent criteria on which to judge Christianity as ‘superior’ to any other of these world traditions. Judging from his own experience and that of those with whom he had come into contact, Hick concluded: “We find that both the virtues and the vices are, so far as we can tell, more or less equally spread among the population, of whatever major faith.”⁸⁴ Similarly, the traditions themselves each share a mixture of good and evil to the extent that it is impossible to say one tradition has less or more good or evil in it than any other, leading to the “negative conclusion that it is not possible to establish the unique moral superiority of any one of the great world faiths.”⁸⁵

All these factors combined to make Hick challenge the idea of the uniqueness of Christian salvation, and his first overtly pluralist work, *God and the Universe of Faiths*⁸⁶ was published in 1973. In it, Hick argues that talk of the incarnation was not literal but mythological. This is a crucial part of Hick’s pluralistic thesis, and is a theme that he developed more fully (along with five other theologians) in *The Myth of God Incarnate*⁸⁷. Here we see the beginning of the thinking that culminates in the pluralistic hypothesis of *An Interpretation of Religion*. Hick argues that once religious language and doctrines are understood as metaphorical and not literal, the way is opened for greater tolerance between religions insofar as they are not hinging their beliefs on literal, fact-asserting claims that contradict each other:

“the realisation that religious language expresses our apprehension of the divine in mythic pictures, and that these pictures are human and culturally conditioned, has opened up for some the possibility that the different mythologies of the great religious traditions may constitute alternative, or perhaps even complementary, rather than rival ways of picturing the divine reality.”⁸⁸

⁸³Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, p. 13.

⁸⁴Ibid.

⁸⁵Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, p. 15.

⁸⁶Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths: essays in the philosophy of religion* (London, Macmillan, 1973)

⁸⁷Hick, ed., *The Myth of God Incarnate* (London, SCM, 1977).

⁸⁸Hick, *The Myth of God Incarnate*, pp.13-14.

Rather than placing Christ as the central salvific figure, making Christianity the unique means to salvation, Hick suggested that instead the emphasis should be placed upon God, and that all religions — not just Christianity — are responses to God. He proposes a paradigm shift “from the dogma that Christianity is at the centre to the realisation that it is *God* who is at the centre and that all religions, including our own, serve and revolve around him.”⁸⁹ To illustrate the significance of this paradigm shift, Hick again uses the analogy of Ptolemaic epicycles (see above, p. 29), in which the plausibility of Ptolemy’s hypothesis was eroded by the constant need for the postulation of epicycles. Copernicus’s theory that the sun, not the earth, was at the centre of the cosmos and that all the planets revolved around it made much more sense of the data. So in the universe of faiths the increasing data about other religions attained through greater awareness and understanding makes the theology which places Christ at the centre increasingly implausible. Instead the hypothesis that God is at centre of the universe of faiths makes much more sense of the data, for it allows an acknowledgement of the evident salvific power in other religious traditions, explaining it in relation to a common God. The analogy of a ‘Copernican revolution’ is also used with reference to Immanuel Kant’s philosophy, and indeed, Hick is strongly influenced by this thinking.⁹⁰

Kant⁹¹ brought about this revolution in philosophy by arguing that perception is influenced and ordered by the subject — as Hick puts it, “we are always aware of reality beyond ourselves in terms of the sets of concepts which structure our own cognitive consciousness.”⁹² This represents a revolution because previously it was thought that one could perceive an object ‘as it is’, without mediating it through ones perceptive and cognitive apparatus; it is ‘Copernican’ because it turns the focus away from the object, to the perceiving subject. This philosophy contributes to the coherence of Hick’s Copernican theology. Since the subject influences how reality is perceived, it makes sense that different ‘subjects’, namely believers from different religious traditions, perceive the Divine Reality in different ways according to their cultural and religious backgrounds. Hick developed this thesis in *God Has Many Names*⁹³ in which, as the title suggests, he

⁸⁹Hick, *God and the Universe of Faiths*, p.131.

⁹⁰In *The Rainbow of Faiths*, Hick explains that he regards Kant as: “on the whole, the most penetrating and illuminating, as well as the most influential, of modern Western philosophers.” (p.47).

⁹¹Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (London, Macmillan, 1939).

⁹²Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, p. 92.

⁹³Hick, *God Has Many Names* (London, Macmillan, 1980)

developed this thesis in *God Has Many Names*⁹³ in which, as the title suggests, he suggests that the different forms of religion have different vocabularies, but are actually worshipping and responding to the same God.

At this stage, Hick was still using the term 'God'⁹⁴ to describe the reality at the centre of the universe of faiths. As his thought developed, and in response to criticisms⁹⁵ he recognised that this terminology apparently excluded non-theistic religions from his pluralistic hypothesis, because in suggesting that a personal being was at the centre it seemed to question the veracity of non-theistic religious claims. Hick accordingly changed his terminology, and it is this latter stage of his work, written during the eighties and most comprehensively expressed in *An Interpretation of Religion*, that will now be focused on in some detail.

The Post-Copernican Pluralistic Hypothesis

An Interpretation of Religion provides a clear and comprehensive exposition of Hick's 'theology' of world religions. It expresses a further paradigm shift — the 'Post-Copernican Revolution'. Whereas previously Hick understood Christ, and later God, at the centre of the universe of faiths, now he sees the Real at the centre, a "putative transcendent reality which is affirmed when the different traditions speak of God or Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, or of the Holy Trinity, or Allah, or Vishnu, or Brahman, or the Dharmakaya/Nirvana/Sunyata and so on."⁹⁶

How Hick supports this hypothesis, and how he understands different faith traditions in the light of it will now be examined by charting the argument of *An Interpretation of Religion*. Hick begins by arguing for the soteriological character of religion. He maintains that all post-axial faiths, including so called 'secular faiths' such as Marxism, are "soteriologically oriented"⁹⁷ — they all recognise that present human existence is in some sense 'defective' or 'lacking', characterised by suffering, and they all contrast this with a future reality or attainable state which is infinitely better: "Thus Christianity speaks of death and eternal life; Judaism of the coming kingdom of God; Islam of judgement and paradise; Hinduism of *mokṣa*; Buddhism of enlightenment and *nirvāṇa*."⁹⁸ According to Hick's hypothesis, the

⁹³Hick, *God Has Many Names* (London, Macmillan, 1980)

⁹⁴Although in the American version of *God Has Many Names* (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1982), Hick replaced the term 'God' with 'the Real'.

⁹⁵For example, Gavin D'Costa, *John Hick's Theology of Religions: a critical evaluation* (Lanham, University Press of America, 1987), p. 154; Julius Lipner, "Does Copernicus Help? Reflections for a Christian Theology of Religions", *Religious Studies*, 13, 1977, p. 253.

⁹⁶Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 10.

⁹⁷Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 32

⁹⁸Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 33.

Real that lies behind all the different religious forms, and has the same characteristic effects on followers:

“In all these forms the ultimate, the divine, the Real, is that which makes possible a transformation of our present existence, whether by being drawn into fellowship with the transcendent Thou, or by realising our deeper self as one with the Real, or by unlearning our habitual ego-centredness and becoming a conscious and accepting part of the endlessly interacting flow of life which is both *saṃsāra* and *nirvāṇa*.”⁹⁹

Hick defines salvation or liberation (he uses both terms together to accommodate both Eastern and Western religious traditions) as the “transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness”, and goes on to demonstrate how each faith tradition has as its ideal a selfless, loving and compassionate attitude towards others. In all the main faith traditions, then, the same process of transformative liberation/salvation is taking place, and indeed the central message of all post-axial faiths is the good news of salvation/liberation.

Having argued for the soteriological character of religion, in the second section, Hick discusses the religious ambiguity of the universe. He points out that, in the Christian tradition, so-called ‘proofs’ of the existence of God, such as the ontological, cosmological and design arguments, have failed to produce conclusive results¹⁰⁰ and theism is not unambiguously demonstrated. He then turns to arguments from morality and religious experience — these, too, are inconclusive, as any religious experience could, in principle, have a naturalistic explanation. However, naturalistic understandings of the universe are also inconclusive. Hick thus concludes that there is no way of knowing whether the universe is ‘religious’ or not:

“It seems ... that the universe maintains its inscrutable ambiguity. In some aspects it invites whilst in others it repels a religious response. It permits both a religious and a naturalistic faith, but haunted in each case by a contrary possibility that can never be exorcised. Any realistic analysis of religious belief and experience, and any realistic defence of the rationality of religious conviction, must therefore start from this situation of systematic ambiguity.”¹⁰¹

⁹⁹Ibid.

¹⁰⁰Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, pp. 73 ff.

¹⁰¹Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 124.

Hick makes this point to demonstrate that it is not clear that any one religious interpretation of reality is obviously more true than any other, and that reality is capable of being construed in many different ways.

Having established this religious ambiguity, Hick moves on to a section devoted to epistemology. He begins by making the Kantian point that our experience is mediated through our perception, and that as humans we are 'programmed' to perceive the world in a certain way that is determined by our survival needs. Since humans live in different environments to each other, there are varying 'conceptual creations', 'inner skeletons' or 'ways of being human' constituting different cultures: "At this level, at which experience is pervaded, moulded and coloured by human meanings ...I wish to maintain that all experience embodies concept-laden forms of interpretation."¹⁰² This being the case, it is impossible in the realm of religious experience to distinguish between *impressions* from an outside reality, or *expressions* that are a result of the concept-laden process of perceiving. In themselves, as reports about reality, religious experiences are ambiguous — they could arise from psychosis, for example, rather than the influence of the transcendent. Similarly there are varying different sorts of religious experience, not all of which seem compatible with each other. Nevertheless, Hick argues that religious experiences can be genuine interactions with the Real — their variety is accounted for by the different 'inner skeletons' and conceptual creations that exist between cultures. This presents the problem of how one tells which experiences are 'genuine' and which are false. Hick argues that what an object — in this case, the Real — *means* is demonstrated by the dispositional response: "For the meaning of an object or situation is its perceived (or misperceived) character such that to perceive it as having that character is to be in a distinctive dispositional state in relation to it."¹⁰³ Thus one can tell the authenticity of an experience by the effect that it has on the subject — if it helps them in their transformation from self to others-centredness, then this suggests a genuine response to the Real:

"Those mystics, in all traditions, who have been accepted and revered have been immensely impressive human beings, whose words have illuminated, challenged and encouraged others and whose lives have revealed the Real by embodying an appropriate human response to one

¹⁰²Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 142. For an interesting article on the epistemological foundations of Hick's hypothesis see Philip Barnes, "Continuity and Development in John Hick's Theology", *Studies in Religion*, 21, 1992, pp. 395-402.

¹⁰³Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 12.

of the *personae* or *impersonae*¹⁰⁴ in which it has been manifested within the human experience.”¹⁰⁵

Hick argues that all the main religious traditions have such ‘sensitives’, thus supporting his thesis that despite the different phenomenal forms of the experience and tradition within which it is perceived, they are all a response to a common Real.

Continuing the epistemological theme, Hick counters the anti-realist critique¹⁰⁶ that sees religious discourse as totally mythological and not fact-asserting, by arguing that the cosmic optimism, the faith in a future liberated state that is common to all the traditions, implies “the basically cognitive and fact-asserting status of standard religious discourse, both western and eastern”.¹⁰⁷ One of the consequences of the anti-realist view is that if all religious language is mythological, not fact-asserting, there is no conflict between the conflicting claims of different religious eschatologies¹⁰⁸. However, maintaining the cognitive status of religious discourse presents a great difficulty: “have we not, in showing the fact-asserting character of the plurality of religious options thereby established their radical incompatibility?”¹⁰⁹ This is one of the main problems that Hick is attempting to address in his pluralistic hypothesis; how is one to admit the cognitivity of religious language, and at the same time maintain that all these conflicting accounts are in one sense true, insofar as they provide ‘soteriological spaces’¹¹⁰ in which individuals are transformed from self to Reality-centredness.

Having thus set the background for Hick’s argument, let us now consider the post-Copernican pluralistic hypothesis that he presents. Hick sees the need for this hypothesis as arising out of the fact that there is a whole range of theistic religions, many with a different ‘intentional object’; and many religious forms and traditions which point to an ultimate that is non-personal. Herein lies the problem — given that religious belief is reasonable and that believers are making fact-asserting claims about reality, the traditions seem incompatible with one another: “Surely these reported ultimates, personal and non-personal, are mutually exclusive?”¹¹¹ Hick suggests three possible responses to this state of affairs —

¹⁰⁴The meaning of these terms will be explained presently.

¹⁰⁵Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 168.

¹⁰⁶Led by thinkers such as Don Cupitt and D.Z. Phillips.

¹⁰⁷Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 188.

¹⁰⁸For a non-realist perspective on inter-faith relations see David Hart's *Non-Realism and the Universe of Faiths* (London, Mowbrays, 1996), pp. 44-6.

¹⁰⁹Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 188.

¹¹⁰Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 240.

¹¹¹Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 234.

firstly, the naturalistic response is that none of the belief systems are true, but are “archetypal daydreams of the human mind.”¹¹² This response is rejected because religious belief is reasonable: “it is entirely reasonable for the religious person, experiencing life in relation to the transcendent ...to believe in the reality of that which is apparently experienced.”¹¹³

The second type of response is to claim that only one’s own tradition is true, and that all the others are false — indeed, this is what most religions have done in the past. To do this, however, is to break the “intellectual Golden Rule” of disallowing a premise to others that one relies upon oneself. The only justification for claiming the superiority of one tradition in this approach is the fact that it is one’s own; since religious adherents from all the different traditions can make this claim, one reaches a complete impasse.

Having rejected both these options, then, Hick advocates a third: “that the great post-axial faiths constitute different ways of experiencing, conceiving and living in relation to an ultimate divine Reality which transcends all our varied visions of it.”¹¹⁴ Thus the visions of all the different traditions would be partially true but incomplete descriptions of the Real.

Religious or ‘Mystical’ Experiences.

Many adherents of the world’s different religious traditions point to mystical experiences as evidence of the truth of their beliefs. Hick defines mystical experiences as “experiences in which the ‘information’ being presented to consciousness has been received by some kind of extra-sensory awareness of our ultimate environment.”¹¹⁵ There is a long history of academic discussion about the status of such experiences, and how they relate to the different religious traditions, and it would be helpful to locate Hick in this debate.

The key attitudes towards mysticism are helpfully summarised by Robert Forman in a book he edited, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*¹¹⁶. Forman describes one school of thought as ‘perennialism’, in which it is argued that mystical experience represents a direct contact with a transcendent reality. Cultural concepts do not enter into this direct experiencing, and as a result “mysticism is by and large culturally homogenous, having a small number of ‘core

¹¹²Ibid.

¹¹³Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 235.

¹¹⁴Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 236.

¹¹⁵Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 165.

¹¹⁶R.C.Forman (ed.), *The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy* (Oxford. Oxford University Press. 1990)

characteristics' that could, indeed, should be analysed independently of any specific, culturally bound mystical philosophies."¹¹⁷ Forman cites such thinkers as Walter Stace, William James, Mircea Eliade and Evelyn Underhill as examples of perennialist philosophers¹¹⁸.

The perennialist position is challenged by what Forman describes as the 'constructivist position'. In contrast to the perennialist belief that it is possible to experience the transcendent directly, constructivism holds that one cannot transcend one's own cultural and linguistic backgrounds, which accordingly determine the kind of experience attained. Forman cites Stephen Katz as providing the most well-known account of constructivism¹¹⁹:

*"There are NO pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences. Neither mystical experience nor more ordinary forms of experience give any indication, or any grounds for believing, that they are unmediated . . . The experience itself as well as the form in which it is reported is shaped by concepts which the mystic brings to, and which shape, his experience."*¹²⁰

Hick locates himself within the constructivist camp — he cites Katz with approval on three occasions in *An Interpretation of Religion*, admitting that he "sides with Katz" in the debate with perennialists such as Stace.¹²¹ Let us now briefly examine how Hick presents the constructivist position in *An Interpretation of Religion*. We have already seen the influence of Kant's philosophy on Hick in relation to the Copernican revolution. This influence is further apparent in Hick's views on epistemology, particularly in respect of mystical experiences. Hick advocates the Kantian hypothesis that all our experience is ordered in our consciousness in accordance with certain 'categories'¹²². For Hick, our perceptions are ordered by: "concepts corresponding to our ordinary sortal words, such as 'grass', 'chair' ... etc., and also certain more general organising concepts,

¹¹⁷Forman, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*, pp. 3-4.

¹¹⁸Walter Stace, *Mysticism and Philosophy* (London, Macmillan, 1960).

¹¹⁹Forman also cites amongst others R.C. Zaehner, *Hindu and Muslim Mysticism* (New York, Schocken Books, 1961) and John Hick, "Mystical Experience as Cognition" in C. Woods, *Understanding Mysticism* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Image Books, 1980), pp.415-21, as providing examples of the constructivist position.

¹²⁰Stephen Katz, "Language, Epistemology and Mysticism" in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, pp.22-74, p.26., [italics original].

¹²¹Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p 170, note 17.

¹²²In his essay, "Does the Philosophy of Mysticism Rest on a Mistake?" in Forman, *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*, pp 237-253, Anthony N. Perovich Jr. argues that Kant's philosophy does not, in fact, support the constructivist critique of mysticism, for it rests on the 'mistake' of "assuming that mystical experience is narrowly 'human' experience and, so, is subject to the same treatment as is 'human' experience generally." p. 250.

which Kant called the categories.”¹²³ The act of perception thus involves an element of interpretation and this interpretation is determined by our needs in relating to the physical environment. Hick describes the “outcome” of this consciousness as “‘experiencing as’ — developed from Wittgenstein’s concept of ‘seeing-as’.”¹²⁴ Hick maintains that all experience is a form of ‘experiencing-as’, demonstrating his agreement with Katz that there are no unmediated experiences. Different cultures, however, may use different concepts to sort their experience; thus there are many different ‘conceptual creations’ through which reality is perceived and understood:

“These conceptual creations are the inner skeletons structuring the various forms of life, or ways of being human, that constitute the different cultures of the earth. And it is at this level, at which experience is pervaded, moulded and coloured by human meanings, that I wish to maintain that all experience embodies concept-laden forms of interpretation.”¹²⁵

This is the case not only for ordinary, sensory experiences, but also for mystical experiences. In his pluralistic hypothesis, Hick argues that “humanity has always been conscious of the Real in terms of a range of concepts and modes of experience”¹²⁶, and that these modes of experience often differ widely. He maintains that, in such experiences, the Real does impact upon the mind of the mystic, but that it is transformed by sorting concepts into a mode that “the mystic’s community can assimilate”:

“In the transformation of information into a meaningful human experience the mystic’s mind employs the same constructive capacities that operate in the creation of dreams. But whereas dreams are (normally) means whereby the complex many-levelled psyche communicates internally with itself, mystical experiences — on a religious interpretation of them — embody information deriving from the transcendent source which I am referring to as the Real.”¹²⁷

¹²³Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 133.

¹²⁴Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 140.

¹²⁵Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 142.

¹²⁶Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 167.

¹²⁷*Ibid.*

The Personae and Impersonae of the Real.

In his post-Copernican hypothesis, Hick borrows and adapts another idea from Kant, that of the noumenon and the phenomenon. Kant argued that, because of the subjectivity of our experience, we cannot know reality as it truly is in itself — it is always mediated by our perceptual apparatus.¹²⁸ There is, however, a reality that informs these perceptions, inaccessible to us in its pure state, which he describes as the noumenon. Reality as we perceive it, the conceptual world of our human experience, he describes as the phenomenon — although it is informed by the noumenon, its shape is determined partly by the faculties we use to interpret it. Hick explains that: “the noumenal world exists independently of our perception of it and the phenomenal world is that same world as it appears to our human consciousness.”¹²⁹ Hick adapts this model to create his pluralistic hypothesis by understanding the Real *an sich* (in itself) as the noumenon, and the different religious conceptions of it, as the phenomenon. By postulating this hypothesis, Hick preserves the realist character of religious discourse:

“the noumenal Real is experienced and thought by different human mentalities, forming and formed by different religious traditions, as the range of gods and absolutes which the phenomenology of religion reports. And these divine *personae* and metaphysical *impersonae*, as I shall call them, are not illusory but are empirically, that is experientially, real as authentic manifestations of the Real.”¹³⁰

Hick here introduces the notion of *personae* and *impersonae* to explain the different modes of knowing and experiencing the Real represented by the theistic and non-theistic traditions respectively. For Hick, these provide the conceptual categories through which mystical experiences are assimilated and understood, the different ways of ‘experiencing as’. He explains the relationship between these two different modes of perception by using the analogy of light — it cannot be directly observed in itself, but depending on the mode of observation, it registers either as waves or as particles. Although the descriptions seem mutually exclusive, in fact the reality of light is such that it can be described in either or these ways, ways which are determined by the methods of the observer. So it is with the Real — it cannot be known *an sich*, but for those who, because of the tradition that they are in, relate to it in terms of “I-Thou encounter”, the Real is personal; for those who “relate to the Real in the mode of non-personal awareness” it is impersonal. Whether one perceives the Real as personal or impersonal is dependent on “the

¹²⁸Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*.

¹²⁹Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 241

¹³⁰Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 242.

range of human cultures, actualising different though overlapping aspects of our immensely complex human potentiality for awareness of the transcendent.”¹³¹ All religious language is cognitive, insofar as it refers to the Real, but the accounts are different because of the different modes of perception: “When we speak of a personal God, with moral attributes and purposes, or when we speak of the non-personal Absolute, Brahman, or of the Dharmakaya, we are speaking of the Real as humanly experienced; that is, phenomenon.”¹³²

To sum up, then, Hick argues that the noumenal Real is beyond human conceptualisation. The phenomena of the Real are perceived in either personal or impersonal terms. These represent the deities or the 'realities' of the world religious traditions.

The impossibility of unmediated experience of the Real.

Some religious traditions, particularly Hindu and Buddhist traditions, claim that mystical experiences can consist of an unmediated experience of the Real *an sich*. Hick cites D.T. Suzuki from the Zen Buddhist tradition who claims that unitive awareness (*prajñā*) of the Real (*śūnyatā*) is to see reality as it truly is, without distortion or interpretation.¹³³ He then points out that the advaita Vedanta tradition also claims the possibility of direct experience of Reality. However, these two example accounts offer different versions of what this Reality is like. For example, in the Zen tradition, nirvana and samsara are one; in advaita Vedanta, “they are distinguished respectively as reality and illusion.”¹³⁴ The difficulty that this presents to the concept of unmediated experience of the Real is that we are presented with “two very different reports, which, taken as accounts of direct, unmediated awareness of the Real as it is in itself, offer incompatible alternatives.”¹³⁵ Indeed, there are various other accounts of the Real, including the ‘personal, loving God’ which is claimed to be experienced by Jewish, Muslim and Christian mystics.

All these claims of unitive mysticism conflict with the constructivist theory. Hick argues that such claims are incoherent. He argues that if there was a single account of unitive mysticism across all religious traditions, then the claim would make sense. However, the fact that there are many different accounts of the

¹³¹Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 245.

¹³²Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 246.

¹³³Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 293, citing Suzuki, *Essays in Zen Buddhism, Third Series* (London and New York, Rider, 1953), pp. 250, 284.

¹³⁴Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 293.

¹³⁵*Ibid.*

‘unmediated Real’ seems to suggest that these accounts, too, are dependent upon the cultural backgrounds and thought-idioms of the subject:

The kind of constructivist argument that Hick puts forward here is powerfully challenged by Forman and others¹³⁶, but it is not fitting to enter into this debate at this stage. Let it suffice to say that Hick argues for the impossibility of pure, unmediated experience of the Real *an sich*. Let us now turn to a closer analysis of Hick’s concept of ‘the Real’, and the role it plays in his hypothesis.

The Real.

Hick argues that because it is noumenal, beyond the realm of experience, nothing substantive can be said about the Real. The Real is a formal postulate to make sense of the data of differing religious experiences and traditions, but one cannot even say that it is a ‘thing’, because that would be to characterise what is not capable of being characterised because it is inaccessible to us *an sich*, in its ‘pure’, uninterpreted form. The Real thus does not have any of the qualities attributed to its manifestations, even though it is the ground of these. Hick explains in *The Rainbow of Faiths* that the Real is “that which there must be if human religious experience is not purely human projection but, whilst involving projection, is at the same time a response to a transcendent Reality.”¹³⁷ There being this reality and there not being this reality is the difference between religious and naturalistic interpretations of religion. Since Hick wishes to keep a ‘religious interpretation’ of religion, and since there are so many different accounts of the ultimate, postulating this hypothesis is the only way the two factors can be held coherently together:

“Because there are several world religions which seem to be soteriologically more or less on a par, a religious interpretation of religion cannot identify the Real with the intentional object of any one of them to the exclusion of the others, and so has to resort to the distinction between the Real as it is in itself and the Real as variously thought of and experienced within the different major traditions.”¹³⁸

¹³⁶Forman, *The Philosophy of Pure Consciousness*.

¹³⁷Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, p. 28.

¹³⁸*Ibid*.

Since one cannot speak about the Real as it is in itself, all language used to describe it by the different religions is in fact mythological. For example, the concept of Christ's incarnation is mythologically, but not literally true. This presents the problem that the mythology of *any* group, even one that acts violently or unethically, might be true. Hick avoids this difficulty by explaining that a myth is true or false according to the dispositional attitude it evokes in the subject; this is the criteria for determining if it is an 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate' response to the Real: "The truth of a myth is its practical truthfulness: a true myth is one which rightly relates us to a reality about which we cannot speak in non-mythological terms."¹³⁹ In responding appropriately to a myth — for example, following the example of Christ's self-giving love, or emulating the Buddha's compassion — one is responding appropriately to the Real: "to the extent that a *persona* or *impersona* is in soteriological alignment with the Real, an appropriate response to that deity or absolute is an appropriate response to the Real."¹⁴⁰ There is not just one appropriate response to the Real — there are various different ways of acting in accordance with it, ways that are expressed through the variety of religious teachings expressed through the world's different traditions.

To sum up the pluralistic hypothesis so far, then, it serves many different purposes. It allows each religious tradition to maintain the cognitivity (in principle) of their beliefs without excluding other faiths which make conflicting claims. It thus avoids the two unfavourable options of seeing all religions as naturalistic, or only one as true:

"Without this postulate we should be left with a plurality of *personae* and *impersonae* each of which is claimed to be ultimate, but no one of which can be. We should have either to regard all the reported experiences as illusory or else return to the confessional position in which we affirm the authenticity of our own stream of religious experience whilst dismissing as illusory those occurring within other traditions. But for those to whom neither of these options seems realistic the pluralistic affirmation becomes inevitable, and with it the postulation of the Real *an sich*, which is variously experienced and thought as the range of divine phenomena described by the history of religion."¹⁴¹

¹³⁹Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 248.

¹⁴⁰*Ibid.*

¹⁴¹Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 249.

Hick stresses that each of the different *personae* and *impersonae*, expressed in the different theistic and non-theistic religions, is equally valid — there is no grounds for saying that one is superior to all the others, although for various reasons one might be more suitable and helpful to one individual than another. To illustrate the fact that all the different religious mythologies are true but not precise descriptions of the Real, Hick provides an analogy in *The Rainbow of Faiths* where he likens the different religious traditions to maps. Maps represent a three-dimensional landscape on a two-dimensional plane — they can be highly accurate, but in another sense they are inevitably a distortion. Similarly, different sorts of map are useful in different circumstances, in the same way that different religions suit different people: “it could be that the conceptual maps drawn by the great traditions, although finite picturings of the Infinite, are all more or less equally reliable within their different projections, and more or less equally useful for guiding us on our journey through life.”¹⁴²

Here, then, Hick provides a *qualified* affirmation of other religions on their own terms, in that he argues that they provide partial and incomplete pictures of the Real. Despite the claims of any tradition to the contrary, Hick maintains unmediated experience of the Real *an sich* is impossible.

The Soteriological Authenticity of Religious Traditions.

When it comes to metaphysics, Hick concedes that not all religious traditions ask the same metaphysical questions. For example, a Buddhist might ask how to cease suffering whilst a Jew might ask ‘how can I keep life holy?’. However, although the specific questions are different, they are the same generically: “They all presuppose a profound present lack, and the possibility of a radically better future; and they are all answers to the question, how to get from one to the other. In traditional Christian language, they are all ways of asking, What must I do to be saved?”¹⁴³ All these metaphysical attempts to explain the mysteries of human life must be mythological, or else they would contradict each other. Instead, the truthfulness of each one “consists of its aptness ... to forward the soteriological process.”¹⁴⁴, and it is this soteriological process, common to all the different traditions, that suggests that they are all responses to the noumenal Real. Any myth that helps to effect the change from self-centredness to Reality-centredness is true insofar as it has soteriological value. Seeing different

¹⁴²Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, p. 27.

¹⁴³Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, p. 41.

¹⁴⁴Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 359.

metaphysical systems and mythologies in this way renders apparently conflicting truth claims compatible: “the great world traditions constitute different conceptions and perceptions of, and different responses to, the Real from within the different cultural ways of being human.”¹⁴⁵

We can see here, then, that Hick applies certain ethical criteria to judge the soteriological authenticity of the Real. In the final section of *An Interpretation of Religion*, Hick expands upon this aspect of his hypothesis by describing the criteria that are shared by all the main faith traditions, which suggest that they are all authentic responses to the Real. He argues that all post-axial religions have the function of providing the context for an individual to transform from self-centredness to Reality-centredness:

“For the function of post-axial religion is to create contexts within which the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness can take place. Accordingly the basic criterion must be soteriological. Religious traditions and their various components — beliefs, modes of experience, scriptures, rituals, disciplines, ethics and lifestyles, social rules and organisations — have greater or less value according as they promote or hinder the salvific transformation.”¹⁴⁶

Thus Hick’s definition of a ‘genuine’ religion is one in which the transformation from self-centredness to reality-centredness is taking place. There must be some criteria, then, for judging whether or not such a transformation has occurred: “on the hypothesis that the major world religions constitute varying human responses to the transcendent Reality, and are thus at least to some extent in alignment with that Reality, the available criteria will be those that have developed within them.”¹⁴⁷

What, then, are these criteria? Hick argues that salvation/liberation shows itself in spiritual and moral fruits. A ‘spiritual’ person, argues Hick, is an individual in whom “signs of salvation are strikingly visible, and who are accordingly known as bodhisattvas, gurus, mahatmas, masters, saints.”¹⁴⁸ The production of these ‘saintly’ figures is one of the criteria for judging whether or not a religious tradition is an authentic response to the Real. Hick defines a saint as: “one in whom the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness is

¹⁴⁵Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 376.

¹⁴⁶Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 300.

¹⁴⁷Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, pp. 300-1

¹⁴⁸Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 300.

so much more advanced than in the generality of us that it is readily noticed and acknowledged.”¹⁴⁹

This transformation usually occurs within the context of a particular religious tradition, but is characterised by certain common features. The main one Hick identifies as: “the transcendence of the ego point of view and its replacement by devotion to or centered concentration upon some manifestation of the Real, response to which produces compassion/love towards other human beings or towards all life.”¹⁵⁰ Hick cites with approval William James, who provides certain definitions of “universal saintliness, the same in all traditions”¹⁵¹. This is worth quoting, for it summarises Hick’s definition of those qualities that characterise one who has undergone the transformation from self centredness to Real-centredness:

- “1. A feeling of being in a wider life than that of this world’s selfish little interests; and a conviction, not merely intellectual, but as it were sensible, of the existence of an Ideal Power
2. A sense of the friendly continuity of the ideal power with our own life, and a willing self-surrender to its control.
3. An immense elation and freedom, as the outlines of the confining selfhood melt down.
4. A shifting of the emotional center towards loving and harmonious affections, towards ‘yes, yes’, and away from ‘no’, where claims of the non-ego are concerned.”¹⁵²

James lists the ‘practical fruits’ of this saintliness as purity, asceticism and charity. Hick adds to this list a quality that in its passive state is “inner peace and serenity”, and in its active state is “a positive and radiant joy”¹⁵³

Hick is keen to point out that this process of transformation is not limited to religious traditions — he argues that the modern age has brought “political saints” who fight for the deliverance from suffering through effecting structural change, and that this motivation is “basically the same as for acts of individual charity in the days of pre-sociological consciousness.”¹⁵⁴ Hick sums up his position by arguing that “the production of saints, both contemplative and

¹⁴⁹Ibid.

¹⁵⁰Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 302.

¹⁵¹Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* p. 302, citing William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience* (London, Collins, 1960), p.268.

¹⁵²William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience*, pp. 268-70.

¹⁵³Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 302.

¹⁵⁴Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 306.

practical, individualistic and political, is thus one valid criterion by which to identify a religious tradition as a salvific human response to the Real.”¹⁵⁵

So far, then, we have established that the existence of ‘saints’ who have undergone a transformation from self-centredness to others-centredness is a criterion by which one can judge a tradition as an authentic ‘soteriological space’, a genuine manifestation of the Real.

Using these criteria, Hick maintains that all the main traditions contain evidence of having successfully provided this context: “The salvation/liberation which it is the function of religion to facilitate is a human transformation which we see most conspicuously in the saints of all traditions.”¹⁵⁶ He adds that, if one uses these criteria, no one religious tradition is any more ‘saintly’, any closer a representation of the Real, than any other:

“But if we now attempt comparative judgements, asking whether tradition A has produced more, or better, saints per million of population than tradition B, we quickly discover that we do not have sufficient information for an answer. All that I myself feel able to venture at present is the impressionistic judgement that no one tradition stands out as more productive of sainthood than another. I suggest that so far as we can tell they constitute to about the same extent contexts within which the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness is taking place. The criterion of saintliness, then, enables us to recognise the great traditions as areas of salvation/liberation, but does not enable us to go on to grade them comparatively.”¹⁵⁷

Thus Hick sees the existence of ethical ‘fruits’ as a sign that a religious tradition is responding to the Real. He argues that it appears that no particular religious tradition demonstrates more ‘fruits’ than any others. This suggests that they are all equally genuine responses to the Real. Let us now consider Hick's ethical criteria in more detail.

The Ethical Criterion — the ‘Golden Rule’.

The basic criterion for evaluating religious traditions is thus soteriological, and epitomised in the lives of saints of all the main traditions. The saintliness “stems in each case from a basic ethical requirement; and it is this that provides the

¹⁵⁵Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 307.

¹⁵⁶Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 309.

¹⁵⁷Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 307.

criterion for the moral assessment of religious phenomena.”¹⁵⁸ Hick notes that this moral requirement can be separated from some of the concrete ways in which it has been displayed in the past, for various other factors could contribute to the way the moral requirement is manifested. For example, Hick describes how human reason could be used to twist moral principles in favour of self-interest, or that cultural beliefs could lead to practices such as the torture and execution of heretics, practices that are currently seen as ‘immoral’ but which were carried out in the name of a religious tradition. Hick argues that one can make a distinction between these manifestations, and the moral values and motivations that underlie them:

“we can distinguish [these beliefs] from the fundamental moral principle of promoting the good of others — both the good of the heretics who were supposedly being saved from hell, and the good of the church as a whole which was supposedly being saved from the dangerous germs of spiritual taint.”¹⁵⁹

This ‘fundamental moral principle’ by which we recognise saints, is, according to Hick, a fundamental part of human nature:

“From a religious point of view we must assume the rooting of moral norms in the structure of our human nature and the rooting of that nature in our relationship to the Real. ...The ethical insights of the great teachers are visions of human life lived in earthly alignment with the Real. Implicit within these we can discern the utterly basic principle that it is evil to cause suffering to others and good to benefit others and to alleviate their sufferings.”¹⁶⁰

This ‘basic principle’, argues Hick, is too basic to be proved: it is the principle upon which all moral discourse is based. Hick describes this basic principle “to treat others as having the same value as myself”¹⁶¹ and that it is “good to benefit others and evil to harm them.”¹⁶² as a description of:

“the ‘Golden Rule’ found in the Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, Taoist, Zoroastrian, Jain and Christian scriptures and in the Jewish *Talmud* and the Muslim *Hadith* and is likewise a translation of Kant’s concepts of a rational person as an end and of right action as action which our

¹⁵⁸Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 309.

¹⁵⁹Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, pp. 311-2

¹⁶⁰Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 312

¹⁶¹Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 149.

¹⁶²Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 313.

rationality, acknowledging a universal impartiality and transcending individual desires and aversions, can see to be required.”¹⁶³

The fact that all traditions are relating in parallel ways to the Real is evidenced by the fact that each one has some variation of this ethical ‘Golden Rule’:

“In each case it begins on the common ground of fair dealing and respect for others’ lives and property and leads on towards the higher ground of positive generosity, forgiveness, kindness, love, compassion, where we find the ethical evidence to the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness.”¹⁶⁴

This fundamental, inbuilt moral criterion that forms the basis of our moral discourse is what enables us to judge religious or spiritual authenticity. The sensitivity to love, compassion and a self-sacrificing concern for others is part of human nature which is “reinforced, refined and elevated to new levels within the religious traditions.”¹⁶⁵ Indeed, this criterion has always been in operation in the identification of great religious leaders — if such teachers taught acts of cruelty and hatred they would not have received their elevated status:

“Thus the ideal of love, compassion, generosity, mercy has always been a basic factor in the recognition of someone as an authentic mediator of the Real. ... It is this basic norm enshrined in the great traditions that provides the broad criterion by which we can make moral judgements in the sphere of religion.”¹⁶⁶

When it comes to applying these criteria to religious phenomena, Hick argues that it is relatively easy to recognise good and evil acts within any particular traditions. He gives examples of bride-burning in Hindu society, amputating hands under Islamic law, and the involvement the Christian church in racial oppression in South Africa as examples of evil acts. He argues that each religious tradition contains a mixture of good and bad — the difficulty comes when the ethical criterion is used to try to ‘grade’ religions as totalities:

“But when we seek to go beyond the identification of particular phenomena as good or evil to make ethical judgements concerning the religious traditions as totalities, we encounter large complicating

¹⁶³Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 149.

¹⁶⁴Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 314.

¹⁶⁵Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 325.

¹⁶⁶Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 326.

factors which must give pause to any project for the moral grading of the great world faiths.”¹⁶⁷

Hick identifies the rise of modern science as one of the main ‘complicating factors’. The rise of science has led to different rates of development in the East and West, with Christianity becoming associated with economic affluence and education in the West. Science has also brought a “humanisation of values”, which in turn has brought ideals such as individual freedom, and compassion in social and political structures: “Thus it seems to many that Christianity is both the source and the inspiration of a contemporary ethical outlook which matches more nearly than any other the common ideal of the great traditions.”¹⁶⁸ Hick argues that this belief does not stand up to analysis, for the relationship between Christianity and modern science is contingent. Although the modern liberal outlook does accord with the basic values of kindness and compassion taught by the great world religions, it “does not represent simply a flowering of Christian teaching.”¹⁶⁹ Indeed, the “application, or misapplication” of Christian principles in the past has led to strongly hierarchical systems where power is narrowly concentrated and where the poor have been oppressed. Giving detailed examples from the Christian and Muslim traditions, Hick demonstrates how the application of certain ethical ideals take different forms in relation to the moral and historical climate that is current at the time, some of which are now seen as morally repugnant.¹⁷⁰ Although all the world religions share “essentially the same ideal of love, compassion, forgiveness”, the way these have been applied to “the concrete circumstances of life in different times”¹⁷¹, has varied enormously. Given these complicating factors, Hick concludes that no one of the main religious traditions appears to be more ‘authentic’ than any other when judged by the ethical criterion:

“Taking the great world traditions as totalities, then, we can only say that each is an unique mixture of good and evil. Each has been and is responsible for or associated with immense contributions to human welfare; each has also been and is responsible for or implicated in vast evils afflicting some part of the human race. It may be the case that, from the point of view of omniscience, one tradition stands out as morally superior to all others. But if so this is not evident from our partial judgement with which all rational persons could be expected to

¹⁶⁷Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 327.

¹⁶⁸*Ibid.*

¹⁶⁹Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 330.

¹⁷⁰Hick gives the example of amputating the hands of thieves in Islam, and slavery in Christianity, *An Interpretation of Religion*, pp. 331-337.

¹⁷¹Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 336.

agree, to assert the overall moral superiority of any one of the great religious traditions of the world. This is the rather modest conclusion to which our discussion points.”¹⁷²

To sum up, Hick contends that the soteriology of religious traditions is testified by their ability to effect a transformation from self-centredness to others-centredness, and that this criterion, as one of the basic elements of human nature, is universal. The criterion cannot be applied to the Real *an sich*, because, as we have seen, this is unknowable. Instead it should be applied to the response that different *personae* and *impersonae* elicit from individuals. Using this method of judgement, Hick concludes that no tradition stands out as better or worse than any other, and that all are productive of individuals who have been transformed from self-centredness to others-centredness. This suggests that each is an authentic response to the Real.

The Pluralist Hypothesis and Buddhism

Having presented Hick’s post-Copernican pluralistic hypothesis, let us now consider the specific case of Buddhism to see how Hick understands it in relation to his thesis. Throughout the various presentations of his hypothesis, Hick refers to many different forms of Buddhism within the broad distinction of the Mahāyāna and Theravāda traditions. In *An Interpretation of Religion*, Hick explains why he thinks the Buddhist tradition qualifies for inclusion in the pluralistic hypothesis. He addresses this in the light of the difficulty presented by the fact that the manifold religious forms are so varied that there appears to be no essence which connects them. For example, the non-theistic Theravāda Buddhism appears to have so little resemblance in its specific forms and beliefs to Islam, that it is hard to see what connects them in the same category of ‘religions’. Hick maintains that it is impossible to find an ‘essence’ of all the different religions, but that they *are* connected by a series of different ‘family resemblances’. He explains this with an analogy: the term ‘game’ is applied to a whole series of different practices, some of which appear to have very little in common with each other, but they are connected in that “each is similar in important respects to some others in the family, though not in all respects to any or in any respect to all.”¹⁷³ (Hick recognises that there are so many different forms of Buddhism that it is “impossible to locate Buddhism at

¹⁷²Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 337.

¹⁷³Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 4.

any one point within the network of family resemblances”¹⁷⁴, and argues that instead of trying to locate a single ‘authentic’ Buddhism’ one can only speak of the multi-faceted Buddhist tradition.)

Thus in the realm of religious traditions, although different theistic traditions can be said to be connected by the concept of a ‘higher unseen power’, this quality is absent in Theravāda Buddhism, although there are similarities between Theravāda Buddhism and many theistic traditions in that they offer “a comprehensive interpretation of life”.¹⁷⁵ Hick favours Tillich’s concept of “ultimate concern” as a “general agreed notion” that unites all the different religious traditions — they all have a sense of being concerned with something of “ultimate importance”¹⁷⁶. He singles out one feature in particular that is common to all the traditions, namely belief in the transcendent. Although this cannot be described as the “essence of religion”, it is nevertheless a feature that unites them all:

“most forms of religion have affirmed a salvific reality that transcends (whilst also usually being thought of as immanent within) human beings and the world, this reality being variously conceived as a personal God or non-personal Absolute, or as the cosmic structure or process or ground of the universe.”¹⁷⁷

In terms of Theravāda Buddhist language, this ‘transcendent reality’ is understood as the goal of Buddhist practice, nibbāna. Just as other post-axial religious traditions see the present reality as unsatisfactory, but redeemed by the ultimate hope of salvation/liberation made possible through the transcendent reality, so Theravāda Buddhism sees the present life as characterised by suffering (*dukkha*), and points to the transcendent state of nibbāna as liberation from this suffering. Like all other post-axial traditions, then, the significance of nibbāna in Theravāda Buddhism is “soteriological, and the liberation which it makes possible presupposes a structure of reality, knowledge of which constitutes good news for all human beings”¹⁷⁸

Similarly, we have seen that Hick claims each religious tradition uses language in a cognitive way, because each makes eschatological claims. In terms of Theravāda Buddhism, this too is expressed by the concept of nibbāna:

¹⁷⁴Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 283. Hick is influenced by Wittgenstein in his understanding of ‘family resemblances’ between different religious traditions. See *An Interpretation of Religion*, pp. 3-5, and Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1963, trans. Anscombe), para. 66.

¹⁷⁵Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p.5.

¹⁷⁶Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p.4.

¹⁷⁷Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p.6.

¹⁷⁸Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p.187.

“Moksha/Nirvana, then is for the Indian religions the blessed eschaton for which believers hope and toward which they strive; and they hope and strive for this as ardently as within the Semitic traditions believers hope and strive for the promised eternal life of heaven, paradise, and the Kingdom.”¹⁷⁹

Hick argues that in both theistic and non-theistic traditions, there is also the concept that such a limitlessly better existence can be realised in this life — this is another factor which unites them. Therefore, despite the fact that different traditions view the Real either in personal or impersonal terms, they share a similar underlying structure; both sorts recognise the unsatisfactory nature of the present existence, and strive towards a limitlessly better existence through response to a transcendent Reality. Hick sees these similarities as a sign that, despite the differences in concepts of the Real, both theistic and non-theistic religions are essentially doing the same thing, namely responding to the Real in its various manifestations. Let us now consider Hick's presentation of the Buddhist goal of nibbāna as a manifestation of the Real.

Nibbāna as a manifestation of the real.

Nibbāna, according to Hick, is the manifestation of the Real within the tradition of Theravāda Buddhism — it is one of its *impersonae*. The fact that the Real takes the impersonal form here is a result of the particular character and framework of the Buddhist tradition:

“the modes of experience which both the Theravāda and the Mahāyāna make possible are ways in which the Real becomes manifest to a human consciousness sensitised by the meditational practices and shaped by the conceptual frameworks of these ancient and profound traditions.”¹⁸⁰

This quotation clearly demonstrates Hick's belief that experience is thoroughly influenced by human perception — the experiences are not merely ‘received’ but are ‘made possible’ by the thought-world from which they are observed.

Hick then briefly elaborates the ‘Buddhist’ view of the world, mentioning the unsatisfactoriness of *dukkha* and the “ceaseless kaleidoscope of ever changing insubstantialities”¹⁸¹ which constitute dependent origination and *samsara*. He explains the role of the self-view in producing suffering: “*dukkha* is created by the ego-centred point of view and mode of apperceiving.”¹⁸², and then characterises

¹⁷⁹Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p.65.

¹⁸⁰Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p.284.

¹⁸¹Ibid.

¹⁸²Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p.285.

nibbāna as the escape from this ego-centredness, and the consequent liberation from suffering. According to Hick, then, nibbāna is liberation from our self-centred consciousness: “the cessation of ego-centredness which generates self-regarding emotion and awareness, thereby turning the world into a threatening environment in which we live in continuous conscious or unconscious anxiety.”¹⁸³ He cites various sections of the Pali Canon where nibbāna is defined, for example, as the cessation of greed, hatred and delusion¹⁸⁴, or the freedom from the conceit ‘I am’¹⁸⁵. However, Hick stresses that nibbāna is not understood in the tradition as merely a “psychological state of unselfcentredness”¹⁸⁶, but “a fundamental and eternal reality that can only be realised through this state of unselfcentredness.”¹⁸⁷ He cites positive descriptions of nibbāna where it is described as “a not-born, a not-become, not-made, not-compounded”¹⁸⁸, or as “the unborn ... the unageing ... undecaying ... undying ... unsorrowing ... stainless.”¹⁸⁹. He does this to demonstrate that the psychological state of nibbāna is grounded in an ultimate reality. Thus, rather than being merely a state of mind, the mental experience of nibbāna “constitutes the immanence of the Ultimate within human life.”¹⁹⁰

Hick points out that the concept of nibbāna as ultimate reality (*paramārtha-satya*) runs throughout most forms of the Buddhist tradition¹⁹¹. He thus feels justified in claiming that nibbāna is a manifestation of the Real:

“From the point of view of our pluralistic hypothesis Nirvana is the Real experienced in an ineffable ego-lessness, unlimited and eternal, which can be entered by the moral and spiritual path taught by the Buddha. From a religious point of view the authenticity of this Buddhist experience is shown by the life-transforming response to the Real which it makes possible.”¹⁹²

We have seen that Hick believes that one of the signs of an authentic response to the Real is the transformation from self to others-centredness, and the existence of the ethical Golden Rule. He sees the Buddhist teaching of no-self (*anattā*) as a teaching that effects the liberating transformation by bringing about

¹⁸³Ibid.

¹⁸⁴S iv 250; Woodward 170, from Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 285.

¹⁸⁵A iv 353; Hare 233, from Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 285.

¹⁸⁶Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p.286.

¹⁸⁷Ibid.

¹⁸⁸*Udāna* 80, iii.

¹⁸⁹M i 163 (Horner)

¹⁹⁰Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 286.

¹⁹¹Hick cites Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (London, George Allen & Unwin, 1955), p. 244, 255-6.

¹⁹²Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 287.

the death of the ego.¹⁹³ Similarly, although he concedes that the Buddhist scriptures do not have a ‘precise formulation of the Golden Rule’ (i.e. that it is evil to cause suffering to others and good to promote their well-being) Hick cites various passages that portray a similar message. For example, he cites the *Dhammapada* claim that “Life is dear to all. Comparing others to oneself one should neither strike nor cause to strike.”¹⁹⁴, and the Sutta-Nipata teaching that one should care for all living beings as a mother cares for her son.¹⁹⁵ The Noble Eightfold Path, too, contains elements that are “directly ethical”, and Hick cites with approval the four cardinal virtues found in the Pali Canon of “friendliness” (*mettā*), compassion (*karuṇā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*) and serenity (*samatha*)¹⁹⁶. These values, he argues, particularly compassion, are shared by other religious traditions. For example, having cited the four cardinal virtues, Hick claims that “essentially the same ideal of universal compassion or love (*agape*) is central to Christianity.”¹⁹⁷ Indeed it is enshrined in all the great traditions and “provides the broad criterion by which we can make moral judgements in the sphere of religion.”¹⁹⁸ The presence of these ethical factors in Buddhism qualifies it for the status of a genuine response to the Real.

Having seen how nibbāna is understood as a genuine response to the Real, let me now demonstrate how Hick uses some of the Buddha's own teachings and concepts to elucidate his pluralistic hypothesis. This is important for demonstrating Hick's understanding of doctrines in his hypothesis. It is also important because it is an area in which Hick's hypothesis diverges from Buddhist self-understanding. This is a point that is extensively argued in the final chapter (pp. 214-224).

The Unanswered Questions: Hick's understanding of views and doctrines.

So far we have seen how Hick views Buddhism as an authentic response to one of the *impersonae* of the Real. We will now consider how Hick explains the different, often conflicting, beliefs and doctrines belonging to different religious systems, for he borrows one of the teachings of the Buddha in order to explain his understanding of these differences. This will also enable us to understand the status that Hick gives to the Buddha's teachings themselves.

¹⁹³Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 41.

¹⁹⁴Dp, 10:2, Narada 1972, p.124; from Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 313.

¹⁹⁵Sn, 149, from Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* p. 313.

¹⁹⁶Hick cites the *Sutta Nipata*, 143ff.

¹⁹⁷Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 322.

¹⁹⁸Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 326.

Hick writes in *An Interpretation of Religion* that how one views the relationship between the different religious doctrines of the world depends upon the epistemological status attributed to them. His basic thesis is that, owing to the ineffability of the Real, all religious doctrines are incomplete, and should be understood mythologically, not literally. Thus he advocates a doctrine not only of “religious knowledge” but also of “religious ignorance” and he uses the Buddha’s teaching of the Unanswered Questions to illustrate this.¹⁹⁹ In the case of the Unanswered Questions, the Buddha is approached by a follower who insists that the Buddha answer ten metaphysical questions about the universe and the self. These are: is the world eternal; is it not eternal; is the world infinite; is it not infinite; is the soul the same as the body; is it not the same as the body; does the Tathāgata exist after death; does he not exist after death; does he both exist and not exist after death; does he neither exist nor not exist after death?²⁰⁰ The Buddha refuses to answer these questions because they are not conducive to realising the eightfold path and gaining liberation. He illustrates this with the example of a man who is shot with a poisoned arrow, and instead of being treated insists that first he must know who shot the arrow, and what it is made of. He consequently dies before he gets the answer to these questions. In the same way, if disciples preoccupy themselves with metaphysical questions that have no relevance to liberation, then they will die still prone to suffering and rebirth. Such questions are rejected by the Buddha because they do not lead to the attainment of nibbāna: “It is accompanied by anguish, distress, misery, fever; it does not conduce to turning away from, not to dispassion, stopping, calming, super-knowledge, awakening, not to nibbāna.”²⁰¹ Hick adds that such an attitude to metaphysical questions is not unique to Buddhism; in the Christian tradition, Julian of Norwich claims that some truth, belonging to ‘our Lord’s privy counsel’ is hidden from us²⁰², and in Judaism “the stress has always been upon right practice, both ritual and ethical, rather than right theory.”²⁰³

In the case of the ten unanswered questions, Hick makes a distinction between two different sorts of question. The first six, he argues, “are in themselves legitimate and admit of true answers”²⁰⁴ — it is possible that the Buddha actually knows the answers to these questions, but also knows that knowledge of the answers is not conducive to salvation. The final four questions are not legitimate

¹⁹⁹Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 343. See also Hick, *Disputed Questions*, pp. 105-118. *The Rainbow of Faiths*, 27-30; 57-65.

²⁰⁰M i 427; Bhikkhu Bodhi 533.

²⁰¹M ii 485; Horner 164, cited Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 345.

²⁰²Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 345.

²⁰³*Ibid.*

²⁰⁴*Ibid.*

because they pose the question through concepts that do not apply — it is not possible to express nibbāna in terms of this life, for it is beyond such characterisations, thus it is impossible to understand what happens to the Tathāgatha in that state. Hick understands this to mean that these four questions refer to realities “that are beyond human comprehension and expression.”²⁰⁵

Hick uses the unanswered questions to support his thesis in two ways. Firstly, in relation to the first set of questions that the Buddha refuses to answer because of their irrelevance to salvation, he infers the argument that “for people holding different views to treat agreement about them as essential for salvation is a dangerous because soteriologically counter-productive error.”²⁰⁶ Hick recommends this approach as useful when applied to inter-faith dialogue in general; since all the great traditions appear to be salvific, there is nothing to be gained from dogmatically affirming the truth of one particular tradition or to oppose the views of others, as they are ultimately secondary, and not uniquely vital for salvation. Thus the key point for Hick is that the myths and beliefs of different religious traditions have a positive soteriological effect on the believer (demonstrated in the presence of ethical 'fruits'). For Hick, this is the most important thing, for it is a sign of genuine engagement with the Real; the content of myths and doctrines is thus secondary to their effects.

Secondly, he uses the Buddha's point about the *unanswerable* nature of the other four questions as support for his thesis that the Real *an sich* is unknowable, and cannot be understood in terms of our present human consciousness: “our language can have no purchase on a postulated noumenal reality which is not even partly formed by human concepts. This lies outside the scope of our cognitive capacities.”²⁰⁷ Indeed, Hick sees eschatological speculations or scenarios as myths which fill a human need “for something to which our minds can cling as we contemplate our own finitude”²⁰⁸. The only sense in which they can be said to be true is if they promote an attitude that conduces to the transformation from self to reality-centredness: “If we have been right in seeing this goal as the transformation of human existence from self-centredness to Reality-centredness, eschatological myths are valid to the extent that they promote that transformation.”²⁰⁹ Ultimately, Hick agrees with the Buddha that if one is close enough to liberation one recognises the irrelevance of eschatological speculations, but for those who are less developed, then myths can serve a useful function.

²⁰⁵Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 347.

²⁰⁶Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 345.

²⁰⁷Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 350.

²⁰⁸Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 355.

²⁰⁹*Ibid.*

In his book *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion*, Hick devotes an entire chapter to the Unanswered Questions, and expands the themes that he introduced in *An Interpretation of Religion*. This detailed exposition is worth considering in some length, for it demonstrates Hick's understanding of the Buddhist tradition, and sheds some light on his views about the cognitive and salvific status of Buddhist claims. In *Disputed Questions*, Hick continues to use the unanswered questions in two ways — firstly, to advocate a pragmatic, non-dogmatic treatment of religious doctrines and metaphysics, and secondly, he uses the *unanswerable* nature of some questions to support his thesis of the unknowability of the noumenal Real *an sich*.

Throughout his presentation of the unanswered questions, Hick is keen to maintain that the concepts should not be confined to the Buddhist tradition, but instead should be applied to all religious traditions. He argues that the 'theory of religious ignorance' presented by the unanswered questions is universally applicable to religious systems:

"It could be that the universe, like a modern spy operation, is conducted on a 'need to know' basis and that what, religiously, we need to know is soteriological rather than metaphysical. If so, the metaphysical differences between the different religious traditions, responding in their distinctly different ways to the various unanswered and unanswerable questions, will not affect the all-important matter of salvation/liberation."²¹⁰

Let us now consider how Hick applies the doctrine of the unanswered questions to inter-faith dialogue in general. The main difficulty when trying to reconcile different religious systems is the existence of conflicting truth claims. Hick identifies three levels of conflict — firstly, there can be conflict over historical issues; secondly, over 'trans-historical' issues (for example, questions that are not answerable by looking at historical facts, such as whether or not there is life after death); and thirdly and most importantly, there can be conflicting truth claims about the conception of the ultimate reality to which (according to Hick) religions are different responses.

Regarding historical issues, Hick maintains that there is relatively little conflict between different religious traditions on these matters, because there are only a few cases where historical claims of different traditions overlap, and most historical questions are able to be settled with reference to historical evidence

²¹⁰Hick, *Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion* (London, Macmillan, 1993), p. 108.

However, in so far as the evidence regarding ancient events is often no longer available, there is a way in which many claims in this field are unanswerable in the first sense, of being answerable in theory, but unanswered in practice. The Buddha's teaching, then, is an appropriate response to such issues — since such questions are either answered or no longer answerable, there is nothing to be achieved by repeatedly attempting to answer them, and it would certainly be counter-productive to over-emphasise differences in these claims between the different religious traditions.

However, Hick acknowledges that, related to these historical questions, there is a further claim or dimension that it is necessary to salvation that certain historical events occurred. These claims make the issue much more complicated. For example, with reference to Christ's crucifixion, there is little historical evidence to contradict the fact that he was crucified; however, to insist that this historical fact must be believed because "it is an integral part of a system of belief the acceptance of which is essential to salvation" creates, according to Hick, "difficulties of the most profound and disturbing kind."²¹¹ Hick's objection to such a position is that he finds it morally repugnant that salvation could be limited to those with a certain specialised historical knowledge: "I find the idea that God has ordained a scheme under which the large majority of the human race are, through no fault of their own, condemned to perdition, so morally repulsive that it would undermine the Godness, or worship-worthiness, of any being who was said to be God."²¹² The doctrine of religious ignorance provided by the unanswered questions provides an alternative to this position which therefore avoids the idea that salvation is exclusive to only those with certain historical knowledge — since certain knowledge is not attainable, then it seems contradictory to maintain that salvation depends upon it.

The second form of conflict of belief, the questions of trans-historical fact, concern those issues "which are not settleable, even in principle, by historical or other empirical evidence."²¹³ Some of these questions, such as the origins of the universe, are unanswered but in principle answerable. Others — such as the fate of a human being after death — are in principle unanswerable in this life. Hick cites the Buddha's example of the question about what happens to the Tathāgata after death — the Buddha maintains that such a question cannot be answered because the concepts we use both to frame the question and to understand any answer are

²¹¹Hick, *Disputed Questions*, p. 110.

²¹²*Ibid.*

²¹³*Ibid.*

not applicable. Hick accepts and adopts the Buddha's teaching that such questions are not necessary for salvation/liberation:

“no scientific knowledge can in itself be religiously significant except in so far as the religions unwisely adopt dogmatic views, as they have some times done, on questions in astronomy, geology, biology, astrophysics, or any other of the special sciences.”²¹⁴

In the case of Christianity, Hick argues that there has always been much concern with trans-historical fact, but that more recently there has been a move towards disentangling the Christian life from commitment to particular dogmatic answers. He hopes that ultimately this development will continue until a “new consensus” is found²¹⁵. Hick anticipates that such a consensus: “may well prove to be not another monolithic consensus at all but rather a pluralistic range of differing theoretical frameworks for the same soteriological process.”²¹⁶

At this point, Hick departs from the Buddha's teaching, in so far as he maintains that the teaching of dependent origination, the Buddha's description of reality, is of the same status as other trans-historical truth claims — it goes beyond experience and cannot be proved, in the same way that the truth claims of other religious traditions cannot be. Hick's treatment of the Buddhist position will be examined in more detail below. For now, let it suffice to say that, rather than seeing all other religious traditions as offering varying interpretations of the ultimate reality of dependent origination, Hick suggests that even this Buddhist theory is an attempt to go beyond the realm of our experience, and thus to answer an unanswerable question. He therefore suggests that all the trans-historical claims of the different religious traditions are claims made about matters which cannot be settled. They are all “different, but for all we know, equally valid modes” of experiencing the Ultimate: “So what I am suggesting in relation to questions of trans-historical fact is that it would be a mark of wisdom and maturity frankly to acknowledge our ignorance.”²¹⁷ In the context of the Christian tradition, this would mean “that we should sit very lightly to our inherited Christian dogmas concerning creation, fall, eschatology and method of salvation.”²¹⁸

Here, Hick separates the ‘method’ of salvation from the fact of salvation/liberation itself, and this is the dichotomy which enables him to understand different religions as all ultimately attaining the same goal. He argues that the “fact of salvation/liberation” — namely, the transformation from self- to Reality-

²¹⁴Hick, *Disputed Questions*, p. 111.

²¹⁵Hick, *Disputed Questions*, p. 113.

²¹⁶*Ibid.*

²¹⁷Hick, *Disputed Questions*, p. 115.

²¹⁸*Ibid.*

centredness is an “observable fact — observable indirectly in its fruits in human life.”²¹⁹ However, the Christian dogma that this state is only attainable as a result of the death of Christ is a “distinctively Christian theory, and it is to this and to all such theories that we should sit lightly.”²²⁰ He maintains that “the reality of salvation/liberation is limitlessly more important than particular theories about it”,²²¹ and that to insist that all human beings adhere to one particular theory about it would be — and, Hick maintains, has been — soteriologically counter-productive. In inter-faith dialogue he proposes that “doctrinal differences ... should be matters of keen speculative interest rather than matters of ultimate concern in which our religious existence is held to be at stake.”²²²

Finally, Hick uses the notion of unanswerable questions with reference to the third kind of truth-claim conflict, the different religious conceptions of the ultimate. He argues that “the nature of the Real in itself, independently of human awareness of it, is the ultimate unanswerable question.”,²²³ because human concepts do not apply to the Real in itself. He draws a distinction between literal application of concepts such as love, justice, personality and power to different *manifestations* of the Real, and mythological statements about the Real in itself. For example, the claim ‘the Real is love’ is literally true of God or Krishna; the claim ‘the Real is impersonal’ is literally true of dependent origination, but all these descriptions are only *mythologically* true of the Real *an sich*. Hick defines ‘mythologically true’ as “tending to evoke in the human hearer an appropriate dispositional response.”²²⁴ Any *personae* or *impersonae* of the Real that promotes this response is ‘mythologically true’ and in ‘soteriological alignment’ with the Real. Hick concludes that “we have ... no adequate reason to think that any of the great world traditions is soteriologically more effective than any other”²²⁵, thus there are a plurality of right responses to the Real.

To sum up, Hick uses the Buddha's teaching of the unanswered questions to deprioritise conflicting religious doctrines and myths over the 'fruits' that they encourage. Since the Real is unknowable *an sich*, metaphysical differences are in principle not settleable; instead, their authenticity as responses to the Real can be judged by the conduct that they encourage.

²¹⁹Ibid.

²²⁰Hick, *Disputed Questions*, pp. 115-6.

²²¹Hick, *Disputed Questions*, p. 116.

²²²Ibid.

²²³Ibid.

²²⁴Hick, *Disputed Questions*, pp. 116-7.

²²⁵Hick, *Disputed Questions*, p. 117.

Skilful Means

In the case of the Unanswered Questions, we see Hick using a Buddhist teaching to support his view of religious ignorance. This religious ignorance must exist when there is an epistemic gap between the Real *an sich* and its manifestations. According to Hick, no religious tradition knows what the Real in itself is like, and the teaching of the unanswered questions is a way of acknowledging and accepting that ignorance in a soteriologically helpful way. One of the results of this understanding of religious doctrines as mythological is that they are seen in a pragmatic way, as means to soteriological ends, rather than as ultimately true in themselves.

Hick takes up this point in *Disputed Questions* and expands it in detail through the adaptation and development of another Buddhist teaching, the doctrine of skilful means (*upāya*)²²⁶. Although the doctrine of skilful means is found in the Pali Canon, it is a teaching that is more comprehensively expounded in Mahāyāna texts²²⁷. However, Hick makes reference to the teaching as it is found in both strands of the Buddhist tradition. He identifies two meanings of *upāya* — a narrower and a broader meaning. He identifies the narrower meaning as the presupposition that “a teacher knows some truth which is to be communicated to others so that they may come to see it for themselves.”²²⁸ Understood in this way, there is an extent to which all teachers use skilful means in that they adapt their teachings to suit the level of their hearers.

Hick is more interested in the broader, more comprehensive understanding of skilful means, which he illustrates with the Buddha’s parable of the raft from the Pali Canon. In the parable a man who is in danger builds a raft to carry him across a river to the safety of the other shore. Once he gets there, he is tempted to carry the raft around with him on his back because it has been so useful to him. Of course, if he does this, the raft will in fact be a hindrance — it no longer serves its purpose, and should be left behind. In the same way, the Buddha describes his Dhamma as “for carrying over, not for retaining.”²²⁹ Hick takes this to mean that the Buddha’s teachings are to be understood pragmatically and non-dogmatically as a means to an end, rather than as something to be attached to for its own sake. He

²²⁶Hick, *Disputed Questions*, pp. 119-136.

²²⁷Hick cites as his sources the Lotus Sūtra, Prajñāpāramitā Literature, and the *Teaching of Vimalakīrti*.

²²⁸Hick, *Disputed Questions*, p. 119.

²²⁹M i 134-5; Horner 173-4, cited Hick, *Disputed Questions*, p. 120.

draws a parallel between this and Wittgenstein's statement that his propositions are like ladders — once one has used the ladder, one must throw it away²³⁰.

Hick cites with approval Michael Pye's claim²³¹ that the attitude promoted by the teaching of skilful means is what enables so many different forms of Buddhism to proliferate in different cultures, for the teachings are adapted to suit different cultural contexts. However, Hick argues that there must be a limit to how far the doctrine of skilful means can be taken. Can it, for example, be applied to the fundamental teachings of the Four Noble Truths, with the concepts of *dukkha* and *nibbāna*, or even to the doctrine of skilful means itself? Hick argues that if skilful means were applied to this extent, then "we are left with nothing but means which are not means to anything, and the whole system collapses into incoherence."²³² To avoid this collapse, Hick argues that a distinction must be made between different levels of 'upayity': "we must say that the doctrine of the end to which Buddhism is a means is not itself another skilful means but is intended ... non-upayically."²³³ There is, he argues, a continuum of upayity, not only within Buddhism, but within other religious teachings — for example, he cites the distinction in modern Christian critical thinking "on the one hand, religious experience, and on the other the philosophical and theological theories to which it has given rise."²³⁴ Using this idea of 'degrees of upayity', Hick argues that certain elements of Buddhism, such as the existence of suffering and the Four Noble Truths, are universally acceptable facts that no "honest and reflective person" could deny: "*Dukkha* is not a metaphysical theory but refers to an experienced reality."²³⁵

However, Hick's Kantian epistemology becomes clear at this point, for he argues that all our experience is subject to the interpretive activity of our minds, and that ultimately all our experience is 'theory-laden': "Our conceptual system is embodied in language, and the world as described is therefore always partially formed by the human experiencer and language-user."²³⁶ The implications of this are that any attempt to communicate any objective reality always involves a level of interpretation: "all human awareness necessarily exhibits distinctively human forms, and ... an intuition of the universe as it is in itself, rather than as it appears within human consciousness, could not be expressed in any language but would require

²³⁰Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 6.54., from Hick, *Disputed Questions*, p. 115.

²³¹Michael Pye, *Skilful Means: A Concept of Mahāyāna Buddhism* (London, Duckworth, 1978), p. 159 ff.

²³²Hick, *Disputed Questions*, p. 121.

²³³*Ibid.*

²³⁴*Ibid.*

²³⁵Hick, *Disputed Questions*, p. 122.

²³⁶Hick, *Disputed Questions*, p. 123.

silence.”²³⁷ This, then, applies to the Buddha’s teaching — Hick argues that as soon as the Buddha taught the *Dhamma* he was necessarily employing skilful means “in the sense that he was conveying in language something that cannot in principle be conveyed in language.”²³⁸ Some of the teachings of the Buddha are more ‘upayic’ than others — whereas the Four Noble Truths have a low level of ‘upayity’, others, such as the Theravāda teaching of not-self (*anattā*), or the Yogacāra teaching of ‘store consciousness’ (*ālayavijñāna*) are “products of special theories, occurring within particular optional ways of seeing and understanding the world.”²³⁹, and thus have a high level of ‘upayity’. Hick also argues that the teaching of dependent origination (*paṭiccasamuppāda*) has a relatively high level of upayity for it involves “a considerable use of optional concepts and assumptions.”²⁴⁰ He maintains that the ‘basic observation’ that “*dukkha* is a product of the point of view of the self-enclosed ego” could be expressed in various other ways, “using different systems of psychological and physiological concepts and distinctions.”²⁴¹ It is, as he puts it, “a cake that can be cut in different ways.”²⁴² Hick goes on to list various Mahāyāna ways of referring to ultimate reality, comparing the Theravāda notion of nibbāna with the notions of the *Trikāya* and *śūnyatā*. He uses these different accounts to support his point that all experience is subject to interpretation and is understood in different ways. The following passage provides a useful summary of how Hick enlists *upaya* in support of his Kantian epistemology:

“The notion of *upaya* is, then, the notion that the cosmic significance of the nirvanic experience can be conceptualised in a variety of ways, all of which communicate the importance and availability of the experience, but none of which constitutes the one and only correct way of conceptualising it. These schemes of thought are provisional and instrumental, and are to be discarded like the raft in the Buddha’s parable once they have fulfilled their function.”²⁴³

Skilful Means in Relation to Other Traditions.

Having thus considered the notion of *upaya* and adapted it in relation to Buddhism, Hick applies it to other religious traditions. For example, if *upaya* were applied to Christianity it would mean looking at the ‘core experiences’ that certain

²³⁷Ibid.

²³⁸Ibid.

²³⁹Hick, *Disputed Questions*, p. 124.

²⁴⁰Ibid.

²⁴¹Ibid.

²⁴²Ibid.

²⁴³Hick, *Disputed Questions*, p. 129.

doctrines display, rather than focusing too much on the content of the doctrines themselves. When this is done, fundamental similarities between apparently conflicting traditions come to light. For example, the “experience of a new life” is believed by Christians “to rest upon the ultimate nature of reality.”²⁴⁴ in the same way that Buddhists believe that the attainment of nibbāna brings about a radically new experience in which suffering is absent. In this respect, Christianity and Buddhism have certain fundamental similarities: “The basic formal inner structure of Christianity parallels that of Buddhism.”²⁴⁵ Hick considers various Christian doctrines that have existed throughout the ages: some, such as the idea that Christ died as a form of ransom for the devil, are implausible now, but have been mythologically true (effective in producing an response in ‘soteriological alignment’ with the Real) in the past. Similarly, other elements of Christian doctrine, such as the Trinity, heaven and hell, the idea of the Church as the Body of Christ, are “likewise upayic”: “They are not absolute and eternal truths but optional conceptualities which have proved useful to those whose formation they have influenced, but not generally to others.”²⁴⁶

Since all religions use doctrines upayically, then ultimately doctrines have the same status; they are essentially doing the same thing, namely interpreting the Real in native cultural terms in a way that encourages believers to act in “soteriological alignment” with the Real. Hick reiterates his claim about the connection between Buddhism and Christianity, which are “both skilful means to a radically new or transformed state of being — a state which is intrinsically desirable and which is believed both to depend upon and to manifest the ultimately real.”²⁴⁷ Even these core experience that different religious traditions share are upayic (in so far as all experience is theory-laden), but the more specific doctrines and ideas that create differences between the traditions are have much higher levels of upayity. Despite these phenomenological differences, religious traditions share a core experience of the transformation from self- to Reality-centredness, and are affected by cosmic reality in the same way. Hick concludes by stating that all the different religious traditions:

“are different forms of *upaya*, skilful means to draw men and women from a consuming natural self-concern, with all its attendant sins and woes, to a radically different orientation in which they have become ‘transparent’ to the universal presence of the Ultimate.”²⁴⁸

²⁴⁴Hick, *Disputed Questions*, p. 130.

²⁴⁵Hick, *Disputed Questions*, p. 131.

²⁴⁶*Ibid.*

²⁴⁷Hick, *Disputed Questions*, p. 133.

²⁴⁸Hick, *Disputed Questions*, p. 135.

Hick understands the unanswered questions and the doctrine of skilful means to mean that religious doctrines are of a provisional and pragmatic, but not an ultimate or absolute value:

“Religious teachings are not absolute and eternal truths but are human ideas that can help people to move at particular stages of their spiritual growth towards the goal of enlightenment, liberation, awakening or, in Christian terms, salvation.”²⁴⁹

This idea is vital for Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis; if all religious doctrines are pragmatic means to attain soteriological ends, but are not true in an absolute sense, then they can co-exist without contradicting each other, for they are all serving the same purpose in different ways. Hick explains that different doctrines suit different people, or that an individual may find different beliefs appropriate at different stages in his or her life. If every world religion could come to see religious beliefs and doctrines in this way, “they would allow people to grow within their own different faith traditions, and would be able to share spiritual resources across traditional borders.”²⁵⁰

Hick does not explicitly claim that the Buddha applied the concept of skilful means to the doctrines of other religions, however — he simply borrows the approach from the Buddha, and develops it to support his own thesis. Indeed, in *Problems of Religious Pluralism* he recognises that Buddhist self-understanding is that the Dhamma is more efficacious in bringing about liberation than any other teaching:

“In the Buddhist tradition it is held that the true appreciation of our human situation occurs most clearly and effectively in the teachings of Gautama Buddha; and that any doctrine which denies the ceaselessly changing and insubstantial character of human life, or the possibility of attaining to the ‘further shore’ of *nirvāṇa*, is not conducive to liberation from the pervasive unsatisfactoriness of ordinary human existence.”²⁵¹

In *The Rainbow of Faiths*, Hick supports this point with an extract from the *Dhammapada*, where it is claimed that the Dhamma is “the only Way. There is none other for the purity of vision.”²⁵²

This leads us to a common criticism²⁵³ of Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis, namely that it does not accommodate any particular tradition’s self-understanding

²⁴⁹Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, p.115.

²⁵⁰Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, p. 116.

²⁵¹Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, p. 48.

²⁵²*The Dhammapada*, 20.2, trans. Narada Marathera, (Colombo: Vajrarama, 1972), p.221; cited Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, p. 113.

²⁵³See for example, Paul Griffiths and Delmas Lewis, “On Grading Religions, Seeking Truth and Being Nice to People - A Reply to Professor Hick”, *Religious Studies*, 19, 1983, pp. 75-80, Gavin

as superior or unique in bringing salvation/liberation. Hick concedes that Buddhism is not alone in having elements in which it regards itself as uniquely superior, and has aspects 'a religious pluralist has to question.'²⁵⁴ Hick addresses this point directly in *The Rainbow of Faiths* where he concedes that an inevitable consequence of his pluralistic hypothesis is that it will diverge from the self-understandings within any specific tradition:

“You have to face up to the fact that no hypothesis about the relation between the different world religions — unless it simply affirms the truth of one and the falsity of the rest — is going to be congruent with the belief system of one of them to the exclusion of the others.”²⁵⁵

Hick does not claim to have a privileged vantage point from which to see the coherence of the pluralist position, but *infers* the hypothesis from the available data, and sees it as more coherent than claiming only one tradition is true, for this would be to ignore the clear soteriological ‘fruits’ of all the other religions. He thus sees the individual as having to make a choice “between a one-tradition absolutism and a genuinely pluralistic interpretation of the global religious situation.”²⁵⁶

According to Hick, then, the only way to make sense of the apparently conflicting claims to salvific effectiveness is to see religious truth claims and doctrines as provisional, pragmatic and not absolute truths, in just the same way that the Buddha viewed his own teachings. This means that any religion that tends towards absolutist claims will inevitably have to adjust its values somewhat if the pluralistic hypothesis is accepted: “none of the world religions can move beyond that point [i.e. inclusivism] without reconstructing at least some of its belief system.” Hick attributes the assumption of each religion that it is superior to others, to psychological factors. For example, it might be attributed to a sort of corporate pride or self-respect, “a natural form of pride in and ingrained preference for one’s own group and its ways.”²⁵⁷ This pride is natural, but becomes harmful when it is promoted to the status of absolute truth, for it gets in the way of mutual respect and tolerance. In fact, Hick argues, if one were to truly follow any of the great religious traditions, then one would reach a point of compassion and acceptance of fellow human beings, rather than competition and rivalry. For example, he sees a ‘basic Buddhist conviction’ as “the universal unity of humanity.”²⁵⁸ He thus sees pluralism as conducive to the ‘spirit’ of religious

D'Costa, 'Whose Objectivity? Which neutrality? The Doomed Quest for a Neutral Vantage Point from which to Judge Religions', *Religious Studies*, 29, 1993 (pp. 79-95). p. 94.

²⁵⁴Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, p. 113.

²⁵⁵Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, p. 48.

²⁵⁶Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, p. 43.

²⁵⁷Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, p. 50.

²⁵⁸Hick, *Problems of Religious Pluralism*, p. 83.

teachings. His vision is that the diversity of the different religious forms should be respected, but each faith can “winnow out the aspect which entails its own unique superiority and increasingly influence one another in inter-faith dialogue with some degree of mutual transformation in which each enriches and is enriched by others.”²⁵⁹

So far, we have looked at how Hick uses the notions of the Unanswered Questions and Skilful Means to suit his pluralistic hypothesis. In his presentation of these doctrines, Hick at times departs from the understanding of these doctrines as they are presented in the Buddhist texts, and argues for an alternative reading. We will now consider how he departs from the Buddhist understanding, and his implicit criticisms of the Buddhist tradition.

Hick is drawn to the Unanswered Questions teaching because of its emphasis on basing theories only on experience, on what is known now, and not engaging in the futile enterprise of theorising about the unknowable. Hick applies these doctrines to the “developments in Buddhist thought” after the time of the Buddha.²⁶⁰ He turns his attention to the idea of dependent origination. Whilst he accepts that the claim that “everything is mutually co-constituted by everything else” is based upon experience, he argues that any claims beyond this are not legitimate: “to affirm that this continuum of *pratitya samutpada* is uncreated and not structured towards any end or fulfilment is to go beyond the witness of experience.”²⁶¹ Similarly, he uses the same argument to reject the denial of a creator:

“I suggest that dogmatic insistence upon the non-existence of a creator, and again a dogmatic insistence that the universe does not have a teleological structure moving towards what we can refer to, in Buddhist language, as universal *nirvana*, would be to go beyond what is known in Buddhist experience.”²⁶²

Not only would such a move be illegitimate, but to insist that knowledge of these ‘truths’ is a prerequisite for finding liberation is ‘soteriologically counterproductive’. Here, it is unclear exactly which Buddhist schools or thinkers that Hick is opposing, as he does not provide examples of any texts that propound the beliefs that he rejects. The role of this argument in his overall thesis, however, is clear. One of the areas in which Buddhism appears to conflict with theistic religions is in its silence as to the existence of a creator, and in its picture of the universe as being governed by an impersonal law of causality. Hick is keen to

²⁵⁹Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, p. 123.

²⁶⁰Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, p. 113.

²⁶¹Ibid.

²⁶²Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, p. 114.

stress that any dogmatic claims about the nature of the universe, claims that would emphasise the differences between the religious traditions, are not grounded in experience, and should not be considered as soteriologically significant.

He makes a similar criticism of the idea of rebirth or reincarnation, a concept that appears to have been accepted by the Buddha. Hick notes that, even though this doctrine is a trans-historical question, the Buddha himself did not classify it in this way. Throughout the Pali Canon, the Buddha operated in the thought-idiom of his time in apparently accepting that “human life is part of a vast karmic process involving repeated rebirths in this and other worlds.”²⁶³ However, since this fact is not ‘universally obvious’, and indeed contradicts many Western religious and naturalistic beliefs, it too is to be categorised as “one of the *avyakata* or undetermined issues”: “If we accept the Buddha’s basic soteriological insight, we shall conclude that it is neither necessary for salvation/liberation to know whether reincarnation occurs nor conducive to salvation/liberation to devote one’s energies to establishing such knowledge.”²⁶⁴

There is a tension here, between this claim that rebirth is an unanswered question, and an argument Hick makes in his chapter on Skilful Means in which he addresses a modern, non-realist, ‘psychological’ understanding of Buddhism.²⁶⁵ On this view, Buddhism is “a psychological technique with no metaphysical implications.”²⁶⁶ Hick rejects this interpretation as elitist: “not so much a gospel for the world as a special option for the fortunate few”²⁶⁷ This is because it is not held that the structure of the universe makes liberation a possibility for everybody: instead, Buddhism consists of a specialised psychological technique, only available to a fortunate few. The Buddha himself said that *nirvana* is not a realistic goal for most people in this present life²⁶⁸ Hick emphasises that it is the Buddha’s insistence on rebirth, and the chance to attain *nirvana* over a succession of lifetimes that prevents the Buddha’s teaching from being elitist, enabling it to be a source of good news for human kind. It is at this point that the apparent contradiction arises between this claim, and his earlier insistence that the question of rebirth is one of the unanswered questions which is not ‘soteriologically relevant’. For Hick criticises the non-realist view of Buddhism, complete with its denial of rebirth and the objective structure of reality, as at odds with Buddhist texts: “the sceptical view does not seem to me to fit well either with the teachings of Gotama as

²⁶³Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, p. 112.

²⁶⁴*Ibid.*

²⁶⁵Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths* (p. 126) cites Don Cupitt as a proponent of this approach. See *Taking Leave of God* (London, SCM, 1980), and *The World to Come* (London, SCM, 1982).

²⁶⁶Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, p. 126.

²⁶⁷*Ibid.*

²⁶⁸D ii 36; Rhys Davids, p. 34; from Hick, *Disputed Questions*, p. 126.

reflected — admittedly, at some remove of time — in the Pali scriptures, or in most of the later developments of Buddhist teaching.”²⁶⁹ However, he also seems to claim that one must be agnostic about the question of rebirth. How is this apparent contradiction resolved?

The answer seems to be that, whilst Hick insists that it makes sense to be agnostic about the ‘specifics’ of the Buddhist understanding of ultimate reality, (for these are claims that go beyond experience), nevertheless, Buddhist language must be seen as operating in a critical realist way if it is to accord with the self-understanding of the tradition as seen in the texts. By critical realist, Hick means “referring to realities beyond ourselves, but realities that are always apprehended in terms of human concepts.”²⁷⁰ Without the idea of an objective reality that informs Buddhist language, or any religious language, Hick believes that the fundamental message of liberation would be undermined: “The universe has a certain objective character which grounds the possibility of *nirvana* for all conscious beings. It is this that makes the Dhamma good news and that motivated the Buddha to preach it to needy humanity.”²⁷¹ However, in the interpretation of the ‘objective character’ of the universe it is the emphasis on human concepts that is vital — all experience of the ultimate is interpreted and limited by human conceptual activity, and is therefore incomplete. Thus the idea of rebirth is merely one picture, one interpretation of ultimate reality, but as a human concept, it is ultimately provisional. It is one possible way of looking at reality, but one of many. The same is true of dependent origination — we have already seen Hick’s insistence that the reality it describes “is a cake that can be cut in different ways.” It is at this point that Hick makes use of the Buddhist idea of skilful means:

“all these different modes in which the ultimate Reality is manifested to Buddhist understanding are modes of *upaya* ... The notion of *upaya* is ... the notion that the cosmic significance of the nirvanic experience can be conceptualised in a variety of different ways, all of which communicate the importance and availability of the experience, but none of which constitutes the one and only correct way of conceptualising it.”²⁷²

Let us conclude by summarising what Hick’s pluralist hypothesis means in the context of Theravāda Buddhism. Firstly, it means that the Buddha’s teachings about the way reality is, including doctrines such as not-self (*anattā*) and dependent

²⁶⁹Hick, *Disputed Questions*, p. 127.

²⁷⁰*Ibid.*

²⁷¹Hick, *Disputed Questions*, p. 124.

²⁷²Hick, *Disputed Questions*, p. 128.

origination, are not to be taken at face value as cognitively true statements about reality. These doctrines are 'salvifically true' in the sense that they can effect the transformation from self-centredness to Reality-centredness, but they are best understood pragmatically or mythologically, as tools to achieve certain effects, rather than as absolute truths. Hick does concede that the Buddha offers the no-self doctrine as a 'theoretical truth', but sees this as much less important than the fact that it functions as "a practical prescription for liberation."²⁷³ Hick adapts the Buddha's own teachings about the Unanswered Questions and the Parable of the Raft to support these ideas.

The concept of nibbāna is also to be viewed mythologically, and not to be taken literally, for by its very nature the Real (of which, according to Hick, nibbāna is a manifestation) cannot be understood or characterised in any human terms. Rather than being a true description of Reality, the concept of nibbāna is a useful tool or image to help individuals orient themselves towards the Real.

Buddhist symbols, traditions and images *are* genuine manifestations of the Real, for they can bring about liberation demonstrated by the transformation from self to reality-centredness. However, they are no more effective than doing so than those of any other religious traditions. In terms of salvific effectiveness, Buddhism is on a par with all the other world religious traditions. In the sense that all these traditions provide an incomplete picture, a human perception of the Real, they are all 'inaccurate', but in the sense that they can all, in their different ways, promote a positive response to the Real they are equally valid. In terms of the religious tradition contemporary to the Buddha's lifetime, this means that 'Brahmanism' and Jainism, for example, were and are equally effective paths to liberation as Buddhism.

Summary

Hick claims that his pluralistic hypothesis is an inductive proposal based on the data that he is presented with. He claims that his hypothesis is the most coherent way of making sense of the data. As we have seen, one of Hick's arguments is that it does not matter if his pluralistic hypothesis contradicts a religion's self-understanding, as this is inevitable, and preferable to the alternatives of propounding either a one-tradition absolutism or naturalism.

The next four chapters of this thesis will look at the Buddha's attitude towards other views and practices as demonstrated in the Nikāyas. As a result of this investigation, a series of arguments will be made against Hick's hypothesis.

²⁷³Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 42.

Firstly it will be shown that Hick misuses the metaphor of skilful means and the unanswered questions; it will be argued that these teachings do not make sense without a grounding in objective knowledge. Secondly, it will be argued that Hick contradicts Buddhist self-understanding to such an extent as to effectively 'exclude' it from his hypothesis. It will be argued that the Buddha's teaching fundamentally rests on the possibility of experiencing reality *unmediated*, a possibility that Hick denies. Hick's agnostic criteria, then, effectively makes him an exclusivist, for his implication is that only traditions that accept his fundamental agnosticism are true. Hick therefore implicitly espouses just the kind of exclusivist view that he wishes to counter. Thirdly, it will be argued that the 'Buddhist' view offers a real critique of Hick's hypothesis. Fourthly it will be suggested that the Pali Nikāyas provide a much more interesting and coherent account of dealing seriously with other religions, accepting them in terms of their own self-description and criticising them accordingly.

The exposition of the 'Buddhist' position will be divided into four chapters. The first will provide a brief introduction to the thought-world and historical background of the Buddha. The second will be devoted to the definitions of liberated and non-liberated individuals in the Nikāyas, in an attempt to elucidate what liberation consists of and how it is attained. The third chapter deals with the relationship of views and doctrines to liberation, as this has an important bearing on the Buddha's attitude towards other groups and teachings. The fourth chapter (chapter five) of this section will contain an exposition and analysis of a selection of the many passages in the Nikāyas where the Buddha encounters and passes judgement on other teachings and traditions.

SECTION TWO

THE BUDDHA'S ATTITUDE TOWARDS OTHER VIEWS, GROUPS AND
TEACHINGS IN THE NIKĀYAS.

CHAPTER TWO: A Brief Introduction to the Buddha's Thought.

My intention in this section is to form and present an understanding of how the Buddha treated teachers and disciples who followed teachings other than his own. This will eventually be used to present a 'Buddhist' perspective on the modern inter-faith debate, and in particular a critique of Hick's post-Copernican pluralist hypothesis. In order to understand the Buddha's attitude to other groups I am focusing on the texts of the Pali Nikāyas as the earliest written account of the Buddha's life and teachings. In this project there are various questions I am seeking to answer: What does it mean to be a follower of the Buddha in the context of the Nikāyas? What is the goal of the Buddha's teaching and what does one have to do in order to attain it? Can this goal be attained without consciously following the Buddha's teachings, namely from the context of a different 'religious' tradition?

All study — all perception even — is done from a certain standpoint and context. This study is being undertaken from the context of a British university religious studies department. Certain current preoccupations within this field of study have led me to undertake this thesis. Perhaps the strongest of these is the contemporary debate about how religions can co-exist with their apparently contradictory truth claims; which (if any) account of salvation or liberation is true and is there one exclusive way to its attainment or many? One of my intentions in this thesis is to provide an early Buddhist 'angle' on this debate. There are many possible ways of engaging a Buddhist critique with the contemporary inter-faith debate. In this thesis I have chosen to focus on the work of John Hick as a protagonist of the contemporary debate. By responding to Hick's thesis from the standpoint of the Nikāyas, I hope to have found an intelligible context within which to apply some of the teachings and insights of the Nikāyas to the contemporary inter-faith debate. In the final chapter there will be an analysis of Hick's thesis in the light of my findings from the Nikāyas. In doing this I hope both to elucidate the Buddha's attitude to soteriological issues and provide a critique of Hick's thesis.

We have already briefly summarised and considered Hick's pluralistic hypothesis. In this section, the focus will be almost entirely on the Nikāyas in order to fulfil the primary purpose of this thesis. In this chapter I will begin by describing the Buddhist primary source that is focused on, the Pali Nikāyas. After this I will give a very brief survey of the Buddha's teaching. This will include a definition of what liberation is according to the Buddha. The next question, and one to which most of this section is implicitly devoted, is: what does one have to do in order to attain

liberation? When this question is answered, then one can perhaps understand who is included and who excluded from liberation. One of the ways of answering the question is to look at the Nikāya accounts of those whom the Buddha describes as being guaranteed liberation; what qualities do they have to possess and how are these qualities attained? How do such individuals differ from the ordinary, non-liberated person? This is the question that will be considered in chapter three, where I will compare the definitions of those who are guaranteed liberation (*ariyasāvaka* -- noble disciple) with the ordinary person (*puthujjana*) who is still ensnared in the cycle of suffering.

In chapter four I will consider this question with particular reference to the issues of views and doctrines. This aspect is worthy of particular attention because it is often over the issues of doctrinal views and beliefs that different religious traditions differ. For example, if a Christian holds that one can only attain salvation by accepting that Jesus Christ was God incarnate, then the Buddhist who does not hold this belief is excluded from liberation. I want to discover if a comparable situation occurs in Buddhism — for example, can an individual only attain liberation if he or she ‘believes in’ key teachings of the Buddha such as not-self and dependent origination? This is significant, for if it were the case, then followers of other teachings would be excluded from liberation. Various issues arise when considering this question — what does it mean to ‘believe’ something? How does this differ from ‘knowledge’? Is it possible to believe without an object of belief? What role do doctrines have in the Buddha’s teaching and in the path to liberation? How do belief and practice inter-relate in Nikāya Buddhism?

In chapter five I will consider those occasions in the Nikāyas where the Buddha encounters or passes judgement on other groups or views. Taking this data and the Buddha’s definition of liberation and the way to attain it, I will attempt to formulate the Buddha’s attitude towards other teachings. In the third section, this will be compared and contrasted to the presentation of Buddhism that is given by Hick. The purpose of this comparison will be twofold; firstly to provide a critique of Hick’s thesis and secondly to offer the Buddha’s teachings as a rival account of how to approach the question of inter-faith dialogue.

This chapter will be structured as follows. Firstly I will briefly trace the history of the Pali Canon, as this is the primary source from which most of the information about the Buddhist tradition is taken. I will then consider the question of who the Buddha was, which will include a survey of the context within which he taught. Secondly I very briefly consider what the Buddha taught, using his descriptions of the four noble truths and a standard formula throughout the Nikāyas which describes an

individual's progress from the everyday lay-life, characterised by suffering, to a state of liberation. Having given a brief summary of the Buddha's teaching, this will allow me to then embark upon a more detailed analysis of some of his teachings which are most relevant to the project of this thesis.

The Pali Canon.

The Pali Canon is a vast collection of Buddhist scriptures usually described as 'belonging to' or created by the Theravāda school of Buddhism. It is also described as the Pali Tipiṭika, ("three baskets"), for it is divided up into three sections (*piṭakas* or 'baskets'): the *Vinaya-piṭaka*, (the basket of discipline), which contains scriptures relating to monastic discipline, the *Sutta-piṭaka*, (the basket of discourses), which contains teachings of the Buddha, and the *Abhidhamma-piṭaka*, (the basket of higher *Dhamma*), which contains later commentaries on the teachings in the *Sutta-piṭaka*.

In this thesis, the focus of attention will be on the *Sutta-piṭaka*, which contains accounts of the Buddha's teachings in specific times and places in his life. There are four 'collections' (*nikāyas*) in the *Sutta-piṭaka*; the *Dīgha Nikāya* (the 'long discourses'), the *Majjhima Nikāya* (the 'middle length discourses'), the *Samyutta Nikāya* (the 'grouped together' discourses, and the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* (the 'gradual discourses'). As their names suggest, the suttas in the first two *Nikāyas* are classified according to their length. The suttas in the *Samyutta Nikāya* are 'grouped together' according to subject. For example, a large proportion of the second part of the *Samyutta Nikāya*, the *Khandhavagga*, is devoted to the subject of not-self (*anattā*). Suttas in the *Aṅguttara Nikāya* are sorted in numerical progression, containing many lists. The *Aṅguttara Nikāya* contains a book of ones, twos, threes, fours and so on. The book of fives, for example, contains the Buddha's description of the five hindrances, the five precepts and so on. Cousins suggests that this form of classification was to aid the memories of those who were reciting, with the classification in terms of length helping monks chose teachings suitable for different occasions. Similarly the preponderance of lists suggests that they were designed to act as mnemonic aids.²⁷⁴

Each *Nikāya* is divided into volumes — there are three books of the *Dīgha Nikāya*, three of the *Majjhima Nikāya*, five of the *Samyutta Nikāya*, and four of the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*.

²⁷⁴Gethin, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening*, p.13. Gethin argues that this use of lists as mnemonic aids makes it difficult to decide the chronology of the discourses for the preponderance of lists does not necessarily point to the lateness of a text.

How does the Pali Canon relate to other Buddhist texts? To the Western reader, the word 'canon' carries connotations of exclusivity and uniqueness²⁷⁵. Whilst the Pali Canon is the only complete surviving *Tipiṭaka* in an Indian language, remnants of the scriptures of other Buddhist 'schools' show that it holds much in common with these other accounts, rather than being completely exclusive and separate. Lack of knowledge about when exactly the Buddha lived, died, and gained enlightenment²⁷⁶ means that it is very difficult to date exactly when Buddhist scriptures first began to appear. However, it is thought that upon the death of the Buddha, a Buddhist council was formed at Rājagaha where the Buddha's followers were informed of his death.²⁷⁷ The Vinaya and Dhamma were then recited by the monks, forming the basis of what was later to be written down to form the scriptures. A hundred years later, another Council was called at Vesali to discuss divisions amongst the Sangha over ten points of discipline, and after discussion and rejection of these ten amendments, the Sangha was re-united.

Some time between the second and third council a split occurred in the sangha between the Sthaviras (the elders) and the Mahāsāṃghikas, who disagreed with the elders over five points involving discipline and the qualities of an Arhat. Subsequent to this division, the Sthaviras themselves split into three groups — the *Pudgalavādins*, (personalists), the *Vibhajyavādins* (analysts), and the *Sarvāstivādins* (those who claim that 'all exists'). The Theravāda tradition is linked to the Vibhajyādins, and the third Buddhist council at Pātaliputra during the reign of Asoka is only recognised in Theravāda sources, suggesting that by that time, different schools had become quite distinct. After this council, Asoka's son, Mahinda, travelled from India to Sri-Lanka with the Vibhajyavādin version of the scriptures, which were still transmitted in oral form. Following a monastic dispute the scriptures were written down for the first time between 29-17 BCE, and it is this version that has outlived all the others.

Quite how the formation of what we now describe as the Pali Canon was influenced by these divisions and disputes is unclear, and a matter of dispute.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁵This understanding of the Pali Canon as an 'exclusive' and 'closed' set of texts is strongly challenged by Steven Collins in his article "On the Very Idea of the Pali Canon.", *Journal of the Pali Text Society*, XV, 89-196, p. 90. Collins argues that the Pali Canon is not legitimately understood as being an exclusive, closed text and traces some historical explanations as to why it often has come to be so understood.

²⁷⁶According to the 'long chronolgy', the Buddha's parinibbāna was in 486 BCE, 218 years before the reign of the Emperor Aśoka (269-232 BCE). The 'short chronolgy' has it that the Buddha reached nibbāna in 386 BCE, one hundred years before Aśoka's reign.

²⁷⁷There is some doubt amongst academics over whether this council was an actual historical event. See C.S. Prebish, "A Review of Scholarship of the Buddhist Councils" in *Journal of Asian Studies*, 33, 1974, pp. 239-54.

²⁷⁸See Prebish's article, listed above, and Prebish and Nattier, "Mahāsāṃghika Origins: The Beginnings of Buddhist Sectarianism", *History of Religions*, 16, 1976, pp. 237-72.

Similarly uncertain is the chronology of the Abhidhamma writings in relation to these events. One factor that makes judgement on such issues difficult is the fact that the scriptures were apparently transmitted orally from the time of the Buddha's enlightenment to the writing down of one version in the first century. Amongst the remaining versions of the Sutta-piṭakas of different schools, there is fundamental agreement about the content of the Nikāyas (collections), with only minor details altering between the different accounts over descriptions such as the setting of certain discourses. This, argues Cousins, is consonant with oral recitations: "It is quite evident that if we compare the Pali recension of the Nikāyas with other surviving versions, the differences we find are exactly those we might expect to discover between different performances of oral works."²⁷⁹

Apart from these minor differences, the Vinayas and Sutta-piṭakas of different scriptures have very much in common, including their mode of classifying the four main nikāyas in terms of length (*majjhima*, 'middle-length', and *dīgha*, 'long'), subject (*saṃyutta*) and numerical progression (*aṅguttara*). According to Gethin, such similarities suggest that the Pāli scriptures are just one more recension of this teaching common to all schools: "As far as the contents of these four primary collections of *sutras* are concerned, all the indications are that there was a remarkable consensus and degree of correspondence among the various recensions."²⁸⁰

Thus similarities between the surviving Vinaya and Sutta Piṭakas of other Buddhist traditions and those of the Pali Canon suggest that the contents of both these piṭakas were decided relatively early, before substantial divisions occurred in the sangha. This, then, undermines the notion of the Pali Canon being in some sense 'exclusive' or more 'faithful' to early Buddhism than other recensions — instead it apparently draws on a heritage common to all the schools.

The *Abhidhammas* of different schools, however, display more substantial differences, suggesting that they were written later, and were influenced by the philosophies that distinguished schools from each other. The *Abhidhamma* or 'higher teaching' represents an attempt to systematise and elaborate the teachings in the suttas.

Despite the variations between different Abhidhammas, Gethin rejects the common notion of a clear "cut-off point" where texts before the Abhidharma are said to be early and representing a common heritage, whilst Abhidhamma texts themselves are peculiar to particular traditions. One argument he cites is that although different Abhidhammas do have new material, some unique, much of it indicates a common

²⁷⁹L.S. Cousins, "Pali Oral Literature" in *Buddhist Studies: Ancient and Modern*, ed. P. Denwood and A. Piatigorsky (London: Curzon Press, 1983), pp. 1-11, p.2.

²⁸⁰Gethin, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening*, p.10.

heritage with other schools. He points to the fact that some ideas and expressions, (for example, the ‘thirty-seven *bodhi-pakkhiya dhamma*’), are not mentioned in the Pali Canon, but nevertheless are common to all Buddhist schools. This suggests that the fact that an idea comes later does not preclude it from belonging to a common heritage: “... while it is apparent that there were divisions in the Sangha, it seems that the various distinct traditions must have remained in communion with each other, and that geographical dispersal as much as doctrinal divergence tended towards the formation of particular traditions.”²⁸¹

Thus, despite many uncertainties about the formation of the Pali canon, it appears that it evolved gradually before being set in writing in the first century BCE, and that it shares enough common heritage with other traditions to shed doubt on the legitimacy of regarding it as an exclusive document.

What, then, of the propensity of modern scholars to see the Pali Canon as *the* authority on early Buddhism? Gethin argues that there are two “simple but inconclusive reasons”²⁸² why this is so. Firstly, the Pali Canon offers the fullest recension of early material that is available to scholars, and is thus more convenient for studying as it provides a more complete or coherent picture. Secondly, the fact that the Pali Canon remains in a Middle Indo-Aryan language and resisted the process of sanskritisation “may be indicative of a more general conservatism”, since we know that the vernacular of the earliest Buddhism was also a Middle Indo-Aryan language. These factors, however, do not give the Pali Canon the sanction of ultimate authority: “the Pali canon cannot simply be taken as the last authority on questions of early Buddhism; quite clearly the traditions found in other sources may be of a similar or even earlier date.”²⁸³

Similarly, Gethin questions the assumption that the earlier the tradition, the ‘purer’ or more authoritative it is. Just as legitimate as the early sources are the later commentaries which have developed from the same tradition. For this reason it would be unwise to isolate earliest texts as the most legitimate “because we do not know whether the Buddhist tradition ever regarded precisely these texts as embodying a proper or meaningful expression of ‘Buddhism’.”²⁸⁴

Indeed, even within the Theravāda tradition itself, it is not the case that the Canon alone functions as ‘scripture’ to the detriment of all other texts and practices

²⁸¹Gethin, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening*, pp. 14-15.

²⁸²Gethin, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening*, p. 10.

²⁸³Gethin, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening*, p. 11.

²⁸⁴Gethin, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening*, p. 15.

“throughout Theravāda history, up to and including the modern world, many other texts, both written and in oral-ritual form, have been used.”²⁸⁵

We have seen how the Pali Canon shares a common heritage with other texts, both within and outside the Theravāda tradition, which makes it virtually impossible to impose a clear cut-off point between exclusively ‘Theravādin’ or canonical texts and other scriptures. This thesis focuses very much on the Nikāyas of the Pali Canon; it is not intended to be an exposition of a specifically Theravādin point of view.

The Buddha.

The Buddha’s World

The precise dates of the Buddha’s lifetime are not known. Different strands of Buddhist tradition place the dates of the Buddha’s life at varying times²⁸⁶. The ‘long chronology’ dates the Buddha’s life from 564-486 BCE. This is based upon the texts of Pali ‘Southern Buddhism’ which states that the king Asoka acceded the throne 218 years after the Buddha’s death in the year 268 BCE. The short chronology of ‘Northern Buddhism’, however, places Asoka’s accession 100 years after the death of the Buddha, and there is evidence to suggest that the accession in fact occurred anywhere between 280 and 267 BCE²⁸⁷. The dates of the ‘corrected long chronology’ are favoured because the dates given seemed to accord with available archaeological evidence, but even this is now under question²⁸⁸:

“From the point of view of reasonable probability the evidence seems to favour some kind of median chronology and we should no doubt speak of a date for the Buddha’s Mahaparinibbāna of c.400 B.C — I choose the round number deliberately to indicate that the margins are rather loose”²⁸⁹.

²⁸⁵Steven Collins, “On the Very Idea of the Pali Canon” p. 103.

²⁸⁶For example, the Northern tradition believed the Buddha died in 881 BCE; the Eastern that he died in 878 BCE, and the Southern, Pali tradition that he died in 543 BCE. See Lance Cousins, “The Dating of the Historical Buddha: A Review Article” in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 6, 1996, 57-63.; Heinz Bechert, ed. *The Dating of the Historical Buddha* (Gottingen, Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1992).

²⁸⁷Richard Gombrich, ‘Dating the Buddha: A Red Herring Revealed’ in Bechert, *The Dating of the Historical Buddha II*, pp. 52-82.

²⁸⁸See Cousins, *op.cit.*

²⁸⁹Cousins, conclusion (article downloaded off the internet so page numbers do not correspond to hard copy)

Thus the situation might be summarised by explaining that scholarly consensus now places the Buddha's enlightenment at around 400 B.C.²⁹⁰

The Brahmanical Tradition

The two main sorts of religious tradition that would have existed in India at the time of the Buddha were the Brahmanical tradition and the 'renouncer' tradition. The Brahmanical tradition is believed to be very ancient, though its precise origins are unknown. The tradition arose out of the Aryan culture, which is generally thought to have been present in India from around 1500 BCE, although there are conflicting theories about how this culture originated.²⁹¹ The oldest text associated with this tradition, the R̥g Veda, is believed to be extremely ancient, having been composed around 1200 BCE (although, once again, there is uncertainty over when the earliest portions were composed)²⁹². As Flood explains, *veda* "is synonym for revelation"²⁹³ and the scriptures texts which constitute the Vedas are claimed to be revealed to sages. Later traditions of Veda texts were the Brāhmaṇas, the Āraṇyakas and the Upaniṣads; these texts are all known as the Vedas. The R̥g Veda consists of a series of hymns to various deities who are to be appeased with various rituals. Indeed, sacrifice was a key element of Vedic culture. Flood explains that sacrifice and sharing a sacrificial meal was the "central religious practice of the vedic Aryans"²⁹⁴, and that through this process of sacrifice, gods were thought to be appeased or encouraged to give blessings and gifts. The R̥g Veda assumed the existence of various gods (*devas*), the most significant being Agni, the fire god, and Soma. Agni could be appeased with sacrifices²⁹⁵ involving fire, and, like Soma, "the pillar of the sky and the bringer of ecstasy and understanding of the divine realms"²⁹⁶, was thought able to intercede

²⁹⁰See Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998), pp.13-14 for a summary of this debate.

²⁹¹The generally accepted theory is that the Aryans migrated into India from central Asia and subjugated the existing, Dravidian culture of the Indus Valley. However, this view has recently been challenged by such thinkers as Colin Renfrew (*Archaeology and Language* [London, Penguin, 1989]), who argue that there is little archaeological evidence for this view and suggest instead that the Aryan culture gradually evolved from its Dravidian roots. For a useful overview of this discussion see Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp. 30-35.

²⁹²See Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, p.37.

²⁹³Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, p.36. Gombrich, however (*Theravāda Buddhism*, p.32), translates *veda* as meaning 'knowledge', but later qualifies this by explaining that the Sanskrit word for vedic scriptures is *s-ruti*, 'what has been heard'. This passive sense accords more with Flood's understanding of the term *veda* as being equivalent to 'revelation'.

²⁹⁴Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, p. 40. For further discussion of the importance of sacrifice, see Collins, *Selfless Persons* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1982), pp. 41

²⁹⁵For a more detailed description of Vedic gods see A.L.Basham, *The Wonder that Was India: A survey of the history and culture of the Indian sub-continent before the arrival of the Muslims* (Fontana, London, 1971), and Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, p. 44ff.

²⁹⁶Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, p. 46.

between people and gods. The texts of the Ṛg Veda were transmitted orally, hence there was a strong tradition of oral recitation surrounding the Veda. Basham explains how a magical entity known as *brahman* became identified with the role of the priest:

“Often in the Ṛg Veda we read of a mysterious entity called *brahman*; in many contexts *brahman* is the magical power in the sacred utterance (mantra), but sometimes it has a wider connotation, and implies a sort of supernatural electricity, known to students of primitive religion as *mana*. The possessor of *brahman*, by a common process of secondary word formation in Sanskrit, became known as *brāhmaṇa*, the tribal priest and magician.”²⁹⁷

The idea of sacrifice was intertwined with cosmology at this time, for it was believed that the world was created as a result of the sacrifice of one of the gods. This account is found in one of the later hymns of the Ṛg Veda²⁹⁸, the Puruṣa Sūkta. The hymn gives an account of a sacrifice of a cosmic giant, a primeval male. This giant figure is dismembered by the gods, and parts of his body used to create the universe: “From his navel the middle realm of space arose; from his head the sky evolved. From his two feet came the earth, and the quarters of the sky from his ear.”²⁹⁹ It was subsequently believed that each time a priest performed a sacrifice, the world was born anew. This state of affairs led to the immense power of the priests, or *brahmins*, in society:

“Without regular sacrifices all cosmic processes would cease, and chaos would come again. Thus the order of nature was an ultimate analysis not dependent on the gods at all, but on the *brāhmaṇas* who by the magic of the sacrifice maintained and compelled them. The *brāhmaṇ* was more powerful than any earthly king or god; by his accurate performance he maintained all things, and was therefore the supreme social servant; by the slightest variation of ritual he could turn the sacrifice against his patrons and destroy them and was therefore the most dangerous of enemies.”³⁰⁰

Connected with this, one of the chief characteristics of Brahmanical society was its hierarchical structure. Society was ordered into two classes, the Aryas and the non-Aryas. In the Arya category there were three hereditary groups. At the top the purest and most powerful were the *brāhmaṇas* who taught and maintained the Vedas; the second class was made up of *kṣatriyas* or rulers who were responsible for maintaining order in society, and thirdly there were the *vaiśyas* who were farmers and trades

²⁹⁷Basham, *The Wonder that Was India*, p. 241.

²⁹⁸RV 10, 90, Puruṣa Sūkta; in *The Rig Veda*, trans. Wendy O’Flaherty (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1981), pp. 29-31.

²⁹⁹Ibid..

³⁰⁰Basham, *The Wonder that Was India*, p. 243

people whose duty it was to generate wealth. The non-Aryan category consisted of servants, or *śūdras* who had to serve the other sections of society. The Puruṣa Sūkta hymn of the Ṛg Veda gives an account of the origins of this division in relation to the sacrifice of the primeval man: “His mouth became the Brahmin; his arms were made into the Warrior, his thighs the People, and from his feet the Servants were born.”³⁰¹ Gombrich explains that it is significant that the Brahmins were made from the mouth as this represents their role as “the mouthpiece of reality.”³⁰² Similarly the fact that the warrior, *kṣatriya* class comes from the arms signifies the power of this class. The mythology of the Ṛg Veda thus demonstrates the hierarchical structure of Vedic society.

Whereas in the Ṛg Veda, an individual was thought to live and die only once, by the time of the Upaniṣads the doctrine of reincarnation and the transmigration of souls had appeared. Basham explains that this was a relatively new idea and that even at the time of the Buddha, transmigration may not have been a widely accepted belief, although it did gain much ground in the sixth and seventh centuries BCE.³⁰³ With the notion of transmigration came the idea of *karma*, of conduct affecting one’s rebirth. It is important to note, though, that in the context of the vedas, *karma* (Pali: *kamma*) has a narrow meaning, referring only to religious acts, in particular, rituals. Gombrich argues that, although the term *karma* evolved to mean ethical and not just ritual acts, the idea of *karma* as a purely ethical concept was an innovation of the Buddha’s: “It was the Buddha who first completely ethicized the concept: in Hinduism ritual and moral obligations remain lumped together.”³⁰⁴ Even gods were thought to be subject to death and rebirth. Thus even if one were reborn in a heaven one would still be subject to suffering: “The growth of the doctrine of transmigration coincided with the development of pessimistic ideas. Rebirth in heaven was not enough — a way had to be found to escape the cycle of birth and death altogether.”³⁰⁵ Flood describes the notion of karma and rebirth as “two ideas of great significance” that emerged between the ninth and sixth centuries BCE.³⁰⁶

In the Āraṇyakas and Upaniṣads, a stronger emphasis was placed upon experiential practice and mysticism than was the case in the earlier Vedas. Flood

³⁰¹RV 10, 90, from O’Flaherty, p. 31.

³⁰²Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, p. 38ff.

³⁰³Basham, *The Wonder that Was India*, p. 244.

³⁰⁴Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, p. 46, p. 66; Elsewhere, Gombrich states that the ‘great innovation’ of the Buddha “was to say that the moral quality of an act lies in the intention behind it”, p. 67. See also Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, pp. 85-6.

³⁰⁵Basham, *The Wonder that Was India*, p. 245.

³⁰⁶Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, p. 75. See also Steven Collins, *Selfless Persons* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1982), p. 29 ff. for the survey of the evolution of such concepts of *kamma*, *samsāra*, and release (*mokṣa*) in early Indian religion.

explains that spiritual knowledge became prioritised over the performance of ritual action: “the Āraṇyakas and Upaniṣads ... completely re-evaluate the nature of ritual, seeing its internalisation within the individual as its highest meaning, and subordinating ritual action to knowledge.”³⁰⁷ This knowledge was attained through various world-renouncing practices (*yoga*). The Buddha was not a Brahmin, but some of these ideas were presupposed in his teaching; for example, the notions of kamma and rebirth and the idea of a cycle of birth and death that could ultimately be transcended.

The Renouncer Tradition

A hymn from the later R̥g Veda describes a class of holy men different to the brāhmaṇas.³⁰⁸ These were the *munis*, the silent ones who indulged in meditative and ascetic lifestyles. There are also references in the *Athārva Veda Saṃhitā* to Vratyas, who were non-vedic priests who did not follow the vedas. The existence of such individuals suggests a gradual weakening of the power of the brahmins. By the time of the Upaniṣads, asceticism was very widespread. The attainment of mystical knowledge through meditation and asceticism was thought to be a way of breaking through the cycle of birth and death, *saṃsāra*. This was opposed to brahmanism which claimed that the magical powers of the brahmin came through lineage of birth and training; the ascetic tradition maintained that there were other ways of attaining these powers. Flood explains that common to all the renouncer traditions was the idea that life is characterised by suffering³⁰⁹, and that to be freed from suffering meant renouncing actions (originally ritual actions) and their consequences: “This renunciation could be achieved through asceticism (*tapas*) and meditation, which means techniques of altering consciousness from the world of the senses in order to experience total world transcendence.”³¹⁰ Such individuals were known as *śramaṇas*, ‘ones who strive’ (Pali, *samaṇa*), and the Buddha is described in the Pali Canon as a *samaṇa*. He was thus part of a tradition, known as the ‘renouncer’ (*saṃnyāsin*) tradition in which individuals renounced their role in society to devote themselves to religious or spiritual pursuits. This usually involved leaving behind one’s family and one’s wealth, and becoming a wandering mendicant, depending on alms for one’s livelihood. Gethin explains that there were many different kinds of practice undertaken by these ascetics, testified by the different terms used to describe them: “in

³⁰⁷Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, p. 75.

³⁰⁸RV 10, 136, *The Long Haired Ascetic*, in O’Flaherty, p. 137-8.

³⁰⁹Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, p. 76. Flood uses the term “all life is suffering”, describing this as the first noble truth of Buddhism. As we shall see shortly, this is not accurate - the first truth of the Buddha taught is that “there is suffering”, which has a significantly different import to the term “all life is suffering”.

³¹⁰Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, p. 76.

addition to ‘one who strives’ and ‘renouncer’ we find ‘wanderer’ (*parivrājaka/paribbājaka*), ‘one who begs his share (of alms)’ (*bhikṣu/bhikkhu*), naked ascetic (*acelaka*), ‘matted hair ascetic’ (*jaṭila*), as well as a number of other terms.”³¹¹ Gethin goes on to identify three types of practice that such wanderers all seemed to be concerned with: firstly, they would practise austerities; secondly, cultivate meditation in the hope of attaining mystical knowledge; and thirdly they would develop philosophical views to provide intellectual justification for their practices and the knowledge they attained. Some groups focused on only one or two of these elements; not all of them were concerned with all three. Flood also provides a summary of three elements common to all ascetic traditions: the idea that “action leads to rebirth and suffering”; that “detachment from action, or even non-action, leads to spiritual emancipation”, and finally the belief that “spiritual emancipation” can be attained by ascetic practices and “methods of making consciousness focused and concentrated.”³¹²

That such varied groups of wanderers existed at the time of the Buddha is testified in the Nikāyas; as we shall see in chapter five, the Buddha regularly encountered other ascetics³¹³. One of the clearest accounts of such a meeting is in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*, where the Buddha responds to ‘six teachers of other schools.’³¹⁴ As we shall see, the brahmins are not included in these lists, but are dealt with separately on other occasions. Some of the religious traditions that arose out of this tradition of asceticism are still in existence today. Buddhism is one obvious example, and Jainism was founded by a naked ascetic, Mahāvīra who was a contemporary of the Buddha³¹⁵. The Jains believed that all suffering was a result of past actions, and that suffering could be ‘worked off’ by engaging in ascetic practices, and that it was best refrain from actions to prevent creating more *karma*: “in their desire to escape rebirth Jains hold that all *karman*, since it entails consequences, is undesirable; thus they arrive at the radical conclusion that the best course is to do nothing.”³¹⁶

A group that does not exist today was the Ājīvikas, members of which are included in the Buddha’s list of six rival philosophers³¹⁷. The Ājīvikas were materialists who denied the operation of kamma and the notion of rebirth. Instead they believed that

³¹¹Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, p. 8. Gethin cites Padmanabh S. Jaini, “Śrāmaṇas: Their Conflict with Brāhmanical Society” in J. W. Elder (ed), *Chapters in Indian Civilisation* (Dubuque, 1970), 139-81.

³¹²Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, p. 77

³¹³For a discussion of the relationship between early Buddhism and other meditative traditions see Johannes Bronkhorst, *The Two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India* (Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden, Stuttgart, 1986), esp. pp. 75-125.

³¹⁴D i 47-86; Walshe 91-110.

³¹⁵For a discussion of early Jain practices, see Bronkhorst, *The Two Traditions*, pp. 29-38.

³¹⁶Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism*, p. 57.

³¹⁷See Basham’s *History and Doctrine of the Ājīvikas* (Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1981).

everything was controlled by fate, *niyati*, which rendered volitional effort or moral activity futile. Flood suggests that these different groups clearly influenced each other: “these early renouncer traditions cannot be understood in isolation from each other as there is mutual cross-fertilisation of terminologies and ideas: Buddhism influences the Brahmanical renouncer religion and brahmanical religion influences Buddhism.”³¹⁸ Although, as we have seen, there were some fundamental differences in teachings and practices between the three main ascetic groups of Jainism, Ājīvikism and Buddhism, they were united by certain common factors in their rejection of Brahmanism:

“All three offered an alternative, or complement, to the popular polytheistic and sacred-place cults of a kind which opposed the Brahmanic magico-mystical ritualism of the sacrifice, whether this was ‘inside’ society as ritual priests or ‘outside’ it as ascetics who had ‘internalised’ the sacrifice as a permanent way of life or imagination.”³¹⁹

Scepticism and materialism also became common. However, as Basham points out, most sceptics did accept some ‘supernatural’ categories, such as transmigration or the existence of supernatural beings. Indeed, as we shall see in due course, the Buddha was no exception to this, and in fact renounced the views of materialists (for example, Ajita Kesakambali) who held that all morality and religious observances were futile.

The relationship between brahmanism and wandering ascetics is not entirely clear. Collins explains that there is an “ambiguous historical situation of mutual ignorance” between Brahmanical and non-Brahmanical Indian traditions³²⁰. The following quotation from Basham demonstrates a certain ambivalence:

“It has been suggested that the development of ascetic and mystical doctrines, especially in the heterodox systems of Buddhism and Jainism, represents a reaction of the warrior class to the pretentiousness of the brāhmaṇas and to the sterility of the sacrificial cult. This, however, is certainly not the whole truth. Buddha and Mahāvīra, the founder of Jainism, were kṣatriyas; they proclaimed the futility of sacrifice and more than one passage in the Buddhist scriptures may be interpreted in an anti-brāhmaṇic sense. But many of the teachers of the new doctrines were themselves brāhmans. The Upaniṣads, which represent the thought of the more orthodox mystics, in no way oppose sacrifice, but maintain its

³¹⁸Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, p. 76.

³¹⁹Collins, *Selfless Persons*, p. 38.

³²⁰Collins, *Selfless Persons*, p. 30.

qualified validity: and passages speaking respectfully of brāhmins are quite as frequent in the Buddhist scriptures as those which disparage them.”³²¹

On the one hand, then, wandering ascetics who did not recognise the authority of brahmins in society were a threat to the brahmanical tradition. On the other hand, brahmanical ideas must have had some influence on the thought of the ascetics, and indeed, the ideas and practices of ascetics must have been reflected somewhat in brahmanism.³²²

In his discussion of how early Buddhism arose from this background, Collins suggests that there are two aspects of influence, the “ethical” and the “conceptual” and that in both areas, the Buddhist tradition characterises the Buddha’s teaching as the ‘Middle Way’ between two extremes of asceticism on the one hand, and indulgence in sense-pleasures on the other. In ethical terms, the Buddha’s taking of the ‘middle way’ is testified by his life-story — as we shall see presently, the Buddha tried and eventually renounced the harsh ascetic practices of other groups. However, he did undergo a process of renunciation in which he went forth from the ordinary, householders’ life and the material possessions and sense-gratification that accompanies it. In the conceptual aspect, Collins argues that there are two significant areas in which the Buddha is portrayed as taking the ‘middle way’. Firstly, the Buddha is contrasted with the argumentative, disputing style of other ascetic groups:

“The picture the Buddhist texts draw, of a large variety of small sects, each with their own ideas, all arguing with each other and sticking to their own particular ‘views’, provides the perfect foil for the image of the Buddha and Buddhist saints as peaceful, unargumentative sages, whose ‘silent wisdom’ transcends philosophical bickering.”³²³

Secondly, the Buddha is portrayed as taking a stand between two extremes of thought that characterised the teachings of other groups:

“On the one hand there are those systems which postulate, and orient all their thinking and behaviour towards, an eternal and divine self or soul — including *inter alia*, the Brahmanical tradition — and which Buddhism calls ‘Eternalism’; on the other hand there is ‘Annihilationism’ which includes both straightforward, ‘materialistic’ conceptions of a self, soul, or person

³²¹Basham, *History and Doctrine of the Ājīvikas*, p. 248.

³²²For a discussion of the relationship of the Buddha’s teaching to brahmanical traditions see Gombrich, *Theravāda Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo* (London, Routledge Kegan Paul, 1988), p.65-72.; ‘The Buddha’s Book of Genesis?’, *Indo-Iranian Journal*, 35, 1992, 159-78; *How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings* (London, Athlone Press, 1996).

³²³Collins, *Selfless Persons*, p. 34.

which exists but which is destroyed at death, and also by assimilation of any kind of thought which rejects the other-worldly/moral account of action — that is, in terms of rewards...”³²⁴.

To sum up, then, there were clearly many different strands of religious thought and practice in India at the time of the Buddha, some of which were complementary and others at odds with each other. Two main traditions can be identified; the brahmanical tradition and the renouncer tradition. The Buddha was a renouncer, but as we shall see, the influence of both traditions can be seen in his thought.

The Buddha

The Buddha fits into this context as a renouncer or wandering ascetic. The earliest Pali sources say the Buddha was born into the relatively wealthy and powerful *kṣatriya* class. He was called Siddhatta Gotama and had a comfortable and privileged upbringing³²⁵. He eventually became disillusioned with this privileged life having seen death, disease and suffering around him and realising that sooner or later these things would affect him or his loved ones. This made his comfortable life seem hollow and he thus left home to become a wandering ascetic (*samāṇa*) in order to seek liberation from suffering through religious and ascetic practices. He tried various forms of extremely austere ascetic practices under different teachers but failed to attain his goal of the cessation of suffering. Eventually he abandoned his teachers and, by himself, sat under an *aśvatha* tree by the banks of a river and meditated until he had an experience which convinced him that he had attained the cessation of suffering. The Buddhist tradition describes this experience as ‘enlightenment’ or ‘awakening’ (*bodhi*) in which the Buddha understood the nature of suffering, its cause, its cessation and the path to its cessation. These four insights constitute the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism. After his enlightenment, the Buddha spent the rest of his life as a wandering teacher, teaching his followers the path to the cessation of suffering. By the time of his death at around the age of eighty he had established a considerable following of both lay and religious mendicant groups.

It is not clear how much of the story of the Buddha is ‘history’ and how much is ‘myth’. It is perhaps anachronistic to ask such a question of texts written in a time when the concepts of ‘myth’ and ‘history’ as separate entities might not even have existed. This is a point that Gethin elaborates on:

³²⁴Collins, *Selfless Persons*, p. 35.

³²⁵Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, p. 15, makes the point that although the Buddha was called a *rāja* (prince) or *kṣatriya* this did not have the connotation of royalty that the term ‘prince’ does today in European cultural terms. Contrary to popular tradition, Gotama was not a royal prince but the son of ‘a locally important aristocratic family’.

“Of course, as the Buddhist tradition tells it, the story of the life of the Buddha is not history nor meant to be. The whole story takes on a mythic and legendary character. A wealth of detail is brought in capable of being read metaphorically, allegorically, typologically and symbolically. Much of this detail is to modern sensibilities of a decidedly ‘miraculous’ and ‘supernatural’ kind. The story of the Buddha’s life becomes not an account of the particular and individual circumstances of a man who, some 2,500 years ago, left home to become a wandering ascetic, but something universal, an archetype ... If we persist in distinguishing and holding apart myth and history, we are in danger of missing the story’s own sense of truth.”³²⁶

A legend containing the narrative of the Buddha’s life is common to all forms of Buddhism. It is found, for example, in the Sanskrit text *Mahāvastu* from the first century CE; in Aśvaghoṣa’s poem, the *Buddhacarita* from the second century; and in the Pali introduction (the *Nidānakathā*) to the collection of stories about the Buddha’s previous lives known as the *Jātaka*, which dates from the fifth century CE. It is also found in the Tibetan tradition.³²⁷

In all the various descriptions of him, the Buddha is not referred to as a ‘creator’ or ‘saviour’ of the universe, but more as a guide or teacher. The following extract is a stock description found in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* and repeated on numerous occasions throughout the Nikāyas:

“a Tathāgata arises in the world, an Arahant, a fully-enlightened Buddha, endowed with wisdom and conduct, Well-Farer, Knower of the worlds, incomparable Trainer of men to be tamed, Teacher of gods and humans, enlightened and blessed. He, having realised it by his own super-knowledge, proclaims this world with its devas, māras and Brahmās, its princes and people. He preaches the Dhamma, which is lovely in its beginning, lovely in its middle, lovely in its ending, in the spirit and the letter, and displays the fully-perfected and purified holy life.”³²⁸

This passage demonstrates the role of the Buddha as an example to other people; he is a testament to the human ability to attain the cessation of suffering and acts as a guide to enable them to achieve this. The term ‘Tathāgata’ in the above passage means, literally, ‘thus gone’ and is suggestive of the Buddha’s liberation from the cycle of

³²⁶Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, p.16.

³²⁷For more information about the legend of the Buddha, and references to other texts, see Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, pp. 16-27.

³²⁸D i 63; Walshe 99.

suffering, *saṃsāra*. Saddhatissa is keen to stress that the Buddha should always be understood as fully human: “the Buddha at no time claimed to be anything other than a human being.”³²⁹, a point that is also stressed by Rahula: “the Buddha was not only a human being; he claimed no inspiration from any god or external power either.”³³⁰ This is something of a problematic account, for on occasions in the Pali Canon, the Buddha is described as a god in one of his previous realms. In the *Mahāpadāna Sutta* and the *Acchariya-abbhūta Sutta*, for example, we are told that before being born as a human, this Buddha and previous Buddhas had existed in the god-realm of Tusita heaven.³³¹ This clearly suggests that, in some incarnations at least, the Buddha was a god. However, the point is that in his final incarnation, the Buddha was fully human and that any human being has the potential to follow the path that he set out and become liberated. The significance of this is that it renders the Buddha’s teaching and example accessible to all human beings: “Every man has within himself the potentiality of becoming a Buddha, if he so wills it and endeavours. We call the Buddha a man *par excellence*. He was so perfect in his ‘human-ness’ that he came to be regarded later in popular religion almost as ‘super-human.’”³³² Indeed, any human has that potential to be reborn in a Tusita realm, and therefore exist as a god. When the suttas describe the Tathāgata as ‘arising’ in the world it does not mean that he magically appears, like a deity, but becomes a Buddha as a consequence of his fulfilment of the spiritual path. As we shall see in chapter four, the Buddha is said to see reality as it truly is (*yathābhūtaṃ*). His perception is free from the distorting factors of greed, hatred and delusion; when one sees things as one truly is then one ceases to suffer. The definition of the Buddha above strongly emphasises his direct knowledge and insight — he sees the world for what it is, and knows the appropriate way to ‘train’ others. Thus rather than being portrayed as a ‘saviour’, the image of a ‘teacher’ is used with reference to the Buddha:

“If one is not familiar with the Indian cultural context it is easy to underestimate the potency of the image here. For a Buddhist no being can match the Buddha’s abilities to teach and instruct in order to gently push beings towards the final truth of things. A Buddha may not be able to save us — that is, he cannot simply turn us into awakened beings — yet, if awakening is what we are intent on, the presence of the Buddha is still our best hope.”³³³

³²⁹H. Saddhatissa, *The Buddha’s Way* (London, George Allen and Unwin, 1985), p.19.

³³⁰Walpola Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught* (Gordon Fraser, Surrey, 1972), p.1.

³³¹D ii 12-13; Walshe 203. M iii 119; Bhikkhu Bodhi 980.

³³²Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, p.1.

³³³Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, p.33-4.

Let us now turn to the Buddha's teaching, the 'Dhamma'.

Dhamma: The Four Noble Truths

The four noble truths are perhaps one of the most concise ways of summarising the Buddha's teaching. He described them as follows in the *Samyutta Nikāya*:

"This is the noble truth of suffering: birth is suffering, ageing is suffering, sickness is suffering, dying is suffering, sorrow, grief, pain, unhappiness and unease are suffering; being united with what is not liked is suffering, separation of what is liked is suffering; not to get what one wants is suffering; in short, the five aggregates of clinging are suffering.

This is the noble truth of the origin of suffering: the thirst for repeated existence which, associated with delight and greed, delights in this and that, namely the thirst for the objects of sense desire, the thirst for existence and the thirst for non-existence.

This is the noble truth of the cessation of suffering: the complete fading away and cessation of this very thirst — its abandoning, relinquishing, releasing, letting go.

This is the noble truth of the way leading to the cessation of suffering: the noble eightfold path, namely right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness."³³⁴

The First Noble Truth

The Buddha taught that there are three kinds of suffering: suffering as pain, suffering as a result of change, and suffering as "inherent in formations."³³⁵ The first form describes mental and physical pains and unpleasant feelings. The suffering as a result of change points to the phenomena whereby pleasant states are transient, and total and permanent happiness constantly elusive, as a result of impermanence. Even when one is in a pleasant state, it can be tarnished by the awareness that this state is likely to change, and this, too, is a cause of suffering. The "suffering as inherent in formations" refers to the fact that, according to the Buddha's teaching, all things in samsara are conditioned and come into existence in dependence on a cause. For this reason, nothing exists inherently in its own right, but only in dependence on other

³³⁴S v 421-22 (Gethin's translation, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, p. 59.)

³³⁵S IV 259, D iii 216; Walshe 484.

things; as a result everything is transient and subject to change and decay: “As such, they are likely to cause suffering (that is, the feeling of suffering) whenever there is inflexible craving and clinging to them through ignorance.”³³⁶

This analysis of suffering is the Buddha’s description of the way things are. In the sense that suffering is experienced by all beings, it is not a ‘creed’, for the existence of suffering is a self-evident fact of experience for any unenlightened being. The Buddha does not attempt to explain on a metaphysical level *why* suffering exists³³⁷ but treats it as a fact of existence that we are all faced with. His teaching is designed to help beings free themselves from this suffering. Understanding suffering in the way taught by the Buddha does require training, but the raw materials that provide the starting point for the Buddha’s path — namely the existence of a suffering being — are already given.

The Second Noble Truth

The second noble truth consists of the Buddha’s ‘diagnosis’ of the causes of suffering — once the ailment is understood, then one can begin to treat it. The Buddha describes the cause of suffering as ‘thirst’ or ‘craving’ (*taṇhā*) for repeated existence, for the objects of sense desire, or for non-existence. There are many different manifestations of craving. Craving for the objects of sense desire is perhaps self-explanatory. It is a cause of suffering because the objects of sense desire are ultimately unsatisfactory — they are subject to change and decay and are thus unreliable. Even if one’s craving for sense desire is momentarily satisfied, this satisfaction does not last; either the desired object itself changes or is taken away, causing suffering, or one becomes dissatisfied with it and seeks a new object of desire. Craving for existence describes the desire to obtain certain states, to be a certain way or to have a certain existence. Like the craving for sense objects, this craving is rarely satisfied and the objects of craving are still subject to change and decay. The desire for non-existence, epitomised in suicidal impulses, is another form of craving, a desire for things to be otherwise. Even beliefs about whether or not one exists after death are manifestations of craving or desire, reflecting a wish either to be or not to be:

“From the perspective of Buddhist thought all these feelings, desires and beliefs are the products of ... the workings of craving for existence and non-existence. Yet in a world where everything is always changing, in a

³³⁶P.A.Payutto, *Dependent Origination: The Buddhist Law of Causality* (Bangkok, Buddhadhamma Foundation, 1994.)

³³⁷His justification for this is explained clearly in the *Cūḷamaḷunkya-sutta* which is examined in greater detail in chapter four, p. 146ff.

world of shifting and unstable conditions, craving of whatever kind will never be able to hold on to the things it craves. This is the origin of suffering.”³³⁸

Craving leads to clinging after things, and this clinging also contributes to suffering. In the *Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta* the Buddha lists four types of clinging — clinging to sensual pleasures, to views, to rules and observances and clinging to a doctrine of self. This clinging is the result of craving ³³⁹. It is important to note that not all clinging is ‘equal’; some forms of clinging are much more conducive to suffering than others. For example, an individual who is attached to deeply unethical habits of conduct (a serial killer, for example), will suffer more and cause more suffering than someone who is attached to a strong morality. Nevertheless, both these forms of attachment are a manifestation of ‘clinging’ and ultimately productive of suffering. Even the Buddha’s Dhamma can be the object of attachment and clinging³⁴⁰. When one is freed from ignorance and craving, then one’s natural conduct is skilful, ethical and pure; the aim of the Buddha’s teaching then, is not to replace clinging for unhealthy objects with clinging for healthier ones, as this would still be a cause and manifestation of suffering. Instead the idea is to rid oneself of all clinging and craving in order to get to the natural state of purity and goodness that is manifested by an unenlightened being.

It is through not seeing the way things really are that one is ensnared in the round of suffering. One craves for objects that are subject to change and decay and unable to bring lasting happiness or satisfaction: “in craving we fail to see how things truly are, and in failing to see how things truly are, we crave. In other words craving goes hand in hand with a fundamental ignorance and misapprehension of the nature of the world.”³⁴¹

When craving and clinging are not satisfied, they can lead to states of hatred, aversion, depression, frustration and anger which in themselves represent further forms of suffering. Thus ignorance, craving and hatred or anger are inextricably linked with each other. According to the Buddhist tradition, the three fundamental defilements of mind are greed, aversion and delusion. The enlightened being has rooted out these defilements and behaves with wisdom and purity, freed from suffering.

As we shall see in subsequent chapters, there is a very strong emphasis on causality in the Buddha’s teaching. Much of the knowledge of the enlightened being

³³⁸Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, p.70.

³³⁹M i 50-51; Bhikkhu Bodhi 137. Also D ii 58; Walshe 224.

³⁴⁰This issue and others surrounding it will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three

³⁴¹Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, p. 73.

constitutes an understanding of the workings of a natural causal law that operates in the world and results in suffering. When this causal law is fully understood, then it is possible to ‘break the cycle’ that leads to suffering and instead use the causality to lead to the cessation of suffering. This causal law is summed up in the key Buddhist teaching of dependent origination. It explains in a sequence of twelve links how ignorance ultimately leads to suffering.

Rather than being a teaching of his ‘invention’, the Buddha explained that dependent origination would be true whether a Buddha was there to teach it or not:

“Whether there is arising of Tathāgathas or whether there is no such arising, this nature of things ... stands, this causal status, this causal orderliness, the relatedness of this to that.”³⁴²

So important is the understanding of Dependent Origination in the quest for the cessation of suffering that the Buddha described understanding it as synonymous with understanding his teachings, the *Dhamma*: “One who sees dependent origination sees the Dhamma; one who sees the Dhamma sees dependent origination.”³⁴³ It is through not understanding dependent origination that people are ensnared in the round of suffering:

“It is through not understanding, not penetrating this doctrine that this generation has become like a tangled ball of string, covered as with a blight, tangled like coarse grass, unable to pass beyond states of woe, the ill destiny, ruin in the round of birth-and-death.”³⁴⁴

Dependent origination is a complex and difficult teaching which, for our present purposes, need not be examined in any more depth. Let it suffice to say that it is a detailed and in depth account of the causes of suffering which constitutes the second noble truth³⁴⁵.

The Third Noble Truth: Nibbāna, the Cessation of Suffering.

Beyond the conditioned world of *saṃsāra* lies the transcendent, supramundane (*lokuttara*) state of nibbāna. Nibbāna is described as the absence of those conditions which cause sorrow and suffering and perpetuate the cycle of dependent origination and *saṃsāra*. In the *Majjhima Nikāya*, nibbāna is described as “unborn ... unageing

³⁴²S ii 25; adapted from Rhys Davids 21.

³⁴³M i 19; Bhikkhu Bodhi 284.

³⁴⁴D ii 55; Walshe 223.

³⁴⁵For accessible summaries of the teaching of dependent origination see for example, Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 54-60; W. Rahula, *What the Buddha Taught*, p. 53ff; P.A. Payutto, *Dependent Origination: The Buddhist Law of Causality* (Bangkok, Buddhadhamma Foundation, 1994.).

... deathless ... sorrowless ... undefiled, the supreme security from bondage.”³⁴⁶ Here, then, nibbāna is described in terms of the absence of the conditions that are the end result of the process of dependent origination, suggesting that nibbāna is the state of freedom from those conditions that inevitably result in some form of *dukkha*. This is reinforced in the same sutta where nibbāna is described as “the tranquillising of all the activities, the renunciation of all attachment, the destruction of craving, dispassion, stopping, nibbāna.”³⁴⁷ Escape from the cycle of dependent origination means that there is a stopping of the factors that lead to rebirth, and the result is cessation: “The subduing of pride in self, the restraint of thirst, the removal of clinging, the cutting off of the base of rebirth, the destruction of craving, freedom from passion, ending, nibbāna.”³⁴⁸

Gethin points out that Pali texts describe nibbāna as something of a process, rather than a state which is attained. The process is one of extinguishing the negative factors (‘fires’) of greed, hatred and delusion:

“At the moment the Buddha understood suffering, its arising, its cessation, and the path leading to its cessation, these fires were extinguished. This process is the same for all who reach awakening, and the early texts term it either as *nirvāṇa* or *parinirvāṇa*, the complete ‘blowing out’ or ‘extinguishing’ of the ‘fires’ of greed, aversion and delusion. This is not a ‘thing’ but an event or experience.”³⁴⁹

After a being has ‘nirvana-ed’ he or she continues to live and function in the world; what makes them fundamentally different to other people is that none of their actions are motivated by greed, aversion or delusion, but are instead grounded in the opposite characteristics of generosity, friendliness and wisdom. When they die, they are not reborn into another existence: “instead of being reborn, the person ‘*pari-nirvāṇa-s*’, meaning in this context that the five aggregates of physical and mental phenomena that constitute a being cease to occur.”³⁵⁰

It is for the attainment of this freedom from suffering, from the realms of dependent origination and rebirth, that the Buddha’s teaching is set forth. The path that is to be followed in accordance to this teaching is described in various ways: it is variously referred to as the Holy life (*brahmacariyaṃ*),³⁵¹ the life of a recluse

³⁴⁶M i 167; Bhikkhu Bodhi 260.

³⁴⁷Ibid.

³⁴⁸A ii 34; Woodward 34.

³⁴⁹Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, p. 75.

³⁵⁰Ibid.

³⁵¹e.g. M i 166; Bhikkhu Bodhi 259. S v 23; Woodward 23.

(*samaññaṃ*),³⁵² ‘the highest life’, or ‘the Brahma-life’ (*brahmaññaṃ*),³⁵³ the noble way that goes to the utter destruction of dukkha (*ariyo maggo sammadukkhayagami*).³⁵⁴ The goal of this way of conduct is the attainment of the freedom which constitutes nibbāna:

“this holy life, bhikkhus, does not have gain, honour and renown for its benefit, or the attainment of virtue for its benefit, or the attainment of concentration for its benefit. But it is this unshakeable freedom of mind that is the goal of this holy life, its heart-wood, and its end.”³⁵⁵

Earlier in the *Majjhima Nikāya* it is explained that “It is for the sake of the final Nibbāna without clinging that the Holy Life is lived under the Blessed One.”³⁵⁶

So far, then, it seems apparent that the problem of suffering is what fuels and informs the Buddha’s teachings; the holy life is a prescription for the cessation of this suffering, nibbāna. This is concisely expressed in the *Dīgha-Nikāya* where the Buddha addresses wanderers of other views, simply explaining to them the purpose of his teachings:

“There are unwholesome things that have not been abandoned, tainted, conducive to rebirth, fearful, productive of painful results in the future, associated with birth, decay and death. It is for the abandonment of these things that I teach Dhamma. If you practise accordingly, these tainted things will be abandoned, and the things that make for purification will develop and grow, and you will attain to and dwell, in this very life, by your own insight and realisation, in the fullness of perfected wisdom.”³⁵⁷

In a similar exchange with wanderers from a different group, the Buddha explains that his reason for teaching the four noble truths is that: “this is conducive to welfare, to Dhamma, to the higher holy life, to perfect disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to tranquillity, to realisation, to enlightenment, to nibbāna. That is why the Lord has revealed it.”³⁵⁸

It is apparent from these extracts that there is a strong pragmatic element to the Buddha’s teaching insofar as the content is determined by reference to a specific goal. It is important to remember the Buddha’s claim in the context of dependent origination that the causal law governing the existence of suffering exists whether or not anyone is

³⁵²S v 23; Woodward 23.

³⁵³Ibid.

³⁵⁴S v 293; Woodward 261.

³⁵⁵M i 197; Bhikkhu Bodhi 290.

³⁵⁶M i 148; Bhikkhu Bodhi 242.

³⁵⁷D iii 57; Walshe 394.

³⁵⁸D iii 137; Walshe 437.

there to teach it — it is not a belief of the Buddha's invention, but a description of the way things are. The same is true of the path to the cessation of suffering — it operates on a causal basis, and the Buddha is merely showing the way it operates.

The Fourth Noble Truth: The Way to the Cessation of Suffering

There are different ways of describing the way to the cessation of suffering that the Buddha taught. In his definition the four noble truths that we saw at the beginning of the chapter, the Buddha described the path to cessation as 'the noble eightfold path' of right view, intention, speech, action, livelihood, effort, mindfulness and concentration. There are different levels of attainment of the eightfold path and different ways of understanding it which makes the issue of describing it rather complex. Thus I will postpone elaboration of the eightfold path to a later chapter (chapter four), and for now concentrate on a stock description of the gradual path to enlightenment that appears regularly throughout the Nikāyas. The example I will use here is from the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*³⁵⁹. This particular version features an individual becoming a monk; however, there are some accounts of lay-people becoming enlightened³⁶⁰, but these are unusual cases, and presupposed that the individuals concerned had renounced the attachments of the world: "When forced to debate this question, the Theravādins held that it would be possible for a layman to attain arahantship only if the layperson actually had renounced all those fetters that characterised the ordinary lay life."³⁶¹ The account begins with the description of the arising of a Buddha that was quoted earlier. A 'householder' then hears the Buddha's Dhamma and gains faith (*saddhā*) in him. He decides to undertake the life of a wandering ascetic: "The household life is close and dusty, the homeless life is free as air."³⁶² He thus leaves his home and family, shaves his head and puts on robes, and adopts the homeless life.

Moral Discipline

The Sutta then explains in great detail how the disciple becomes "perfected in morality"³⁶³. One of the first elements of morality that he develops includes the basic

³⁵⁹D i 63-84; Walshe 99-108. The same formula is found in the next eleven suttas of the Dīgha Nikāya, and a variation of it is also found in M i 179ff; Bhikkhu Bodhi 272ff., and M i 345ff; Bhikkhu Bodhi 448ff.

³⁶⁰e.g. A iii 451; Hare 314.

³⁶¹George D. Bond, "The Arahant: Sainthood in Theravāda Buddhism" in ed. Kieckhefer and Bond, *Sainthood: Its Manifestations in World Religions* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1988), p.144.

³⁶²D i 63; Walshe 99.

³⁶³Ibid.

ethical code that the Buddha taught, known as the five precepts. These are: abstaining from taking life; abstaining from taking the not-given, abstaining from sexual misconduct; abstaining from false speech (such as lying or being abusive) and abstaining from the taking of intoxicants which cloud the mind. The account in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* then lists in great detail the many rules that constitute the *Pāṭimokkha*, the rules for the monastic life. It is not necessary here to list these rules — the point is that the first stage of the path is the development (and eventual perfection of) moral discipline. The sutta explains this goal with a simile:

“Just as a duly-anointed Khattiya king, having conquered his enemies, by that very fact sees no danger from any side, so the monk, on account of his morality, sees no danger anywhere. He experiences in himself the blameless bliss that comes from maintaining this Ariyan morality.”³⁶⁴

Restraint of the Senses

Moral discipline, then, has the effect of creating peace of mind and a solid foundation for the next stage of development, which is described as “guarding the sense-doors.”³⁶⁵ We saw earlier in the description of the second noble truth the role of craving and clinging in creation of suffering. The practice of restraint of the senses is an attempt to limit and ultimately stop this clinging:

“Here a monk, on seeing a visible object with the eye, does not grasp at its major signs or secondary characteristics. Because greed and sorrow, evil unskilled states, would overwhelm him if he dwelt leaving the eye-faculty unguarded, so he practises guarding it, he protects the eye-faculty, develops restraint of the eye-faculty.”³⁶⁶

The same formula is used for the four other senses. The Buddhist tradition understands the mind as the sixth sense. Whenever the sense faculties are listed, the mind is included as one of them, and in this context, the mind faculty is guarded in order to avoid ‘unwholesome states’ such as covetousness and grief.

Mindfulness

The next stage that is listed consists of mindful awareness and clear comprehension of one's actions:

³⁶⁴D i 69-70; Walshe 100.

³⁶⁵D i 70; Walshe 100.

³⁶⁶Ibid.

“Here a monk acts with clear awareness in going forth and back, in looking ahead or behind him, in bending and stretching, in wearing his outer and inner robe and carrying his bowl, in eating, drinking, chewing and swallowing, in evacuating and urinating, in walking, standing, sitting, lying down, in waking, in speaking and in keeping silent he acts with clear awareness. In this way, a monk is accomplished in mindfulness and clear awareness.”³⁶⁷

Like the previous practice of the restraint of the sense faculties, the point of mindfulness is to control the mind, to be aware of its workings and thus to be able to limit craving and clinging at the point where it hits.

Contentment

Contentment, too, is aimed to counter the force of clinging. It describes the process of being satisfied with the minimum of need-requirements, in this case, robes and almsfood: “Just as a bird with wings flies hither and thither, burdened by nothing but its wings, so he is satisfied with a robe to protect his body, with alms to satisfy his stomach, and having accepted sufficient, he goes on his way.”³⁶⁸

Having perfected all these qualities, the disciple is now ready to begin meditation; when he finishes his alms-round he “finds a solitary lodging” such as a forest, a cave, or a mountain and “he sits down, cross-legged, holding his body erect, and concentrates on keeping mindfulness established before him.”³⁶⁹

The Abandoning of the Hindrances

According to the Buddha’s teaching, there are five hindrances that obstruct meditative attainment. These are covetousness or sense desire; ill-will and hatred; dullness and drowsiness; restlessness and worry, and doubt. In his meditation the disciple purifies his mind from covetousness; he abandons ill-will and his mind is full of “compassionate love for the welfare of all living beings”. He abandons dullness and drowsiness and he perceives “light, mindful and clearly aware.” Having abandoned restlessness and worry, he is “inwardly calmed”, and when he has abandoned doubt, he is “without uncertainty as to what things are wholesome.”³⁷⁰

³⁶⁷D i 70-71; Walshe 100.

³⁶⁸D i 71; Walshe 101.

³⁶⁹Ibid.

³⁷⁰Ibid.

The abandoning of the hindrances is described as a process of release, a feeling of being “Freed from debt, from sickness, from bonds, from slavery, from the perils of the desert.” It triggers a positive causal process that provides the foundations for deep mental concentration:

“When he knows that these five hindrances have left him, gladness arises in him, from gladness comes delight, from the delight in his mind his body is tranquillised, with a tranquil body he feels joy, and with joy his mind is concentrated.”³⁷¹

The Four Jhānas

In Pali, the word ‘jhāna’ means, literally, ‘meditation’; the Buddha describes four stages to meditation, known as the four jhānas. They are characterised by increasing focus and concentration. The first jhāna is the initial stage of focused meditation that occurs when the hindrances have subsided. It is a state of concentration that is accompanied by “thinking and pondering, born of detachment”³⁷². Indeed, it is a thoroughly pleasant experience in that every part of the disciple’s body is said to be “suffused” by this sense of rapture.

If the disciple continues with his meditation, then applied and sustained thought subsides and is replaced by the second jhāna, “which is without thinking and pondering, born of concentration, filled with delight and joy.”³⁷³ This stage thus takes the mind beyond thought to purer and more profound levels of consciousness; like the first jhāna, it brings with it joy and rapture.

In the third jhāna, the meditator moves beyond joy and rapture to a state of equanimity and mindfulness. Such is his equanimity that feelings of joy and grief pass away. In the fourth jhāna, he “gives up pleasure and pain” and moves to a state of complete mindfulness and equanimity:

“The monk ... with the disappearance of former gladness and sadness, enters and remains in the fourth jhāna which is beyond pleasure and pain, and purified by equanimity and mindfulness. And he sits suffusing his body with that mental purity and clarification so that no part of his body is untouched by it.”³⁷⁴

³⁷¹D i 73; Walshe 102.

³⁷²Ibid.

³⁷³D i 74; Walshe 103.

³⁷⁴D i 75; Walshe 103.

Knowledge and Vision

Having attained the four jhānas, the disciple is now in a state of extremely heightened consciousness and calm. At this stage he attains certain insights into reality, ‘the way things really are’ (*yathābhūtaṃ*), and is able to see for himself that which the Buddha has already pointed out. There are various different knowledges that the disciple attains at this stage³⁷⁵, some of which might be labelled ‘supernatural’ by the contemporary Western consciousness. For example, he is said to be able to exercise certain ‘supernormal’ powers, enabling him to walk through walls, walk on water or levitate. He is able to understand the minds of others:

“he knows the mind with passion to be with passion; he knows the mind without passion to be without passion. He knows the mind with hate to be with hate; he knows the mind without hate to be without hate. He knows the deluded mind ... the undeluded mind ... He knows the liberated mind to be liberated; he knows the unliberated mind to be unliberated.”³⁷⁶

He is also able to recall his own past lives, and one of the final stages of insight, the ‘knowledge of the divine eye’, enables him to see passing away and re-appearance of other beings in accordance with their kamma. He sees that beings who behaved with “misconduct of body, speech or thought” are “reborn in a lower world, a bad destination, a state of suffering, hell.”³⁷⁷ Similarly, he sees that those with good conduct have pleasant rebirths — he is able to see for himself the truth of what the Buddha taught.

The final, liberating knowledge that he attains is “the knowledge of the destruction of the taints”. The taints, or *āsavas*, are a form of ignorance and craving that causes suffering. There are four taints: the taint of sense desire (*kamāsava*); the taint of craving for states of becoming (*bhavāsava*); the taint of attachment to beliefs and views (*diṭṭhīsava*); and the taint of ignorance of the way things are (*avijjāsava*). The disciple sees and understands for himself the four noble truths, and he sees the taints, their origin, their cessation and the path to their cessation. With this knowledge he destroys the taints and has attained his goal: the cessation of suffering:

“And through his knowing and seeing his mind is delivered from the taint of sense-desire, from the taint of becoming, from the taint of ignorance, and the knowledge arises in him: ‘This is deliverance!’, and he knows:

³⁷⁵Namely: insight knowledge, knowledge of the man-made body, knowledge of the modes of supernormal power, knowledge of the divine ear, knowledge of encompassing the minds of others, knowledge of recollecting past lives, knowledge of the divine eye and knowledge of the destruction of the corruptions.

³⁷⁶D i 79-80; Walshe 105-6.

³⁷⁷D i 82; Walshe 107.

‘Birth is finished, the holy life has been led, done is what had to be done, there is nothing further here.’”³⁷⁸

This point marks the climax of the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*; the sutta is dedicated to answering the questions of King Ajāsattu, who wished to know the fruits of following the holy life under the Buddha. Liberation from suffering is the ultimate ‘fruit’, and at the end of the sutta, the King declares himself a lay-follower.

There are some significant points to make about this ‘gradual path, which will be made more of in later chapters. One is the causal nature of the path; certain conditions have to be fulfilled before the disciple moves from one stage to the next. Gethin describes the basic logic behind this:

“In order to see the four truths, the mind must be clear and still; in order to be still, the mind must be content; in order to be content, the mind must be free from remorse and guilt; in order to be free from guilt one needs a clear conscience; the bases of a clear conscience are generosity and good conduct.”³⁷⁹

This presupposes a certain understanding of the mind — namely, that it responds in certain predictable ways to particular conditions. It seems that the whole of the Buddha’s teaching is premised upon this understanding of how the mind works, for his analysis of suffering and his description of the path to its cessation is focused on the workings of the mind.

Another related point is that liberation is attained by getting rid of certain ‘defilements’ of the mind, such as greed, hatred and delusion. The idea is that once these defilements are removed, then the mind is liberated; it is not a question of attaining ‘extra’ qualities but rather of letting unskilful ones go so that the skilful, pure ones can shine through.

Summary

To sum up, in this chapter there has been a brief account of the historical and cultural background from which the Buddha’s teaching arose. This has been followed by a very basic outline of his teaching, focusing on the concept of the four noble truths. The fourth noble truth, the path to the cessation of suffering, has been illustrated with a standard formula of the path to liberation that is found in the *Dīgha Nikāya*. This description of the gradual paths portrays the message that the attainment of liberation

³⁷⁸D i 84; Walshe 107-8.

³⁷⁹Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, p. 83.

requires the operation of a certain causal process in which the mind is gradually freed from taints and defilements until the disciple is able to see things as they truly are, and ceases to suffer.

In the next chapter, I will look at this process of liberation in more detail, by focusing on the definitions in the Nikāyas of those who are liberated and those who are not. The purpose of this is to elucidate the criteria for liberation according to the Buddha's teaching in the Nikāyas. This will help to build up a picture of Buddhist 'soteriology' that can be compared and contrasted with other accounts in the contemporary inter-faith debate.

CHAPTER THREE: Liberated and Non-Liberated Individuals

The Noble Disciple/Ordinary Person Distinction.

According to the Buddhist tradition, every being has the potential to attain nibbāna eventually. It may not be possible to attain it in one's present lifetime, but since all states of existence in the conditioned realm of saṃsāra are impermanent, each being will eventually be in an existence where the attainment of nibbāna is a possibility. The human realm is one such level of being where it is possible to attain liberation. Having thus established that every human has the potential to attain nibbāna in this lifetime, I wish to consider a fundamental spiritual division that exists throughout the Nikāyas. This is the distinction between those who are irrevocably on the course to the attainment of nibbāna and those who are not. The individual who, in common with most other people, has the potential to be liberated but has not yet begun to realise that potential is called the 'ordinary person' (*puthujjana*). The individual who is irrevocably bound towards nibbāna is called a 'noble disciple' (*ariyasāvaka*). As we shall explore presently, there are four types of noble disciple, distinguished by their relative positions on the path to liberation. The noble disciple is bound ultimately to fulfil the fourth noble truth, the path to the cessation of suffering, and will eventually attain nibbāna. He is contrasted to the 'ordinary person', who, through not fulfilling or understanding the *brahmacariya* set forth by the Buddha and epitomised in the eightfold path, is destined to continue being reborn in saṃsāra, and thus continue to be subject to dukkha. The distinction between the noble disciple and the ordinary person is the fundamental spiritual division within the Nikāyas, for it describes the difference between those who are definitely on course for the attainment of liberation, and those who are not. For this reason it is very important to summarise how these two categories of person are defined, for in doing so it is possible to answer the question of what characteristics one must have in order to gain liberation according to the Nikāyas. It is important to note that any 'ordinary person' can potentially become a 'noble disciple'; in order to do so they must practise the path set forth by the Buddha to a certain degree, until they reach a 'point of no return' towards liberation. At this point they become noble disciples. The term used to describe the first kind of noble disciple, the 'streamwinner', provides a useful image of this point of no return; once one enters a fast flowing stream, one cannot go backwards, but is cast irrevocably in the direction of the stream. So the noble disciple has reached a point from which he or she can only go forwards towards liberation, and is irrevocably bound to attain the ultimate goal.

The ordinary person, however, always has the potential to become a noble disciple and attain liberation, but is not *irrevocably* bound on that course. Let us now consider the characteristics of the 'ordinary person' in more detail.

The 'Ordinary Person', (*Puthujjana*)

Many of the descriptions of the ordinary person focus on his ignorance, his failure to see the way things really are, which in turn results in the craving or clinging that is at the root of suffering.³⁸⁰

We will see presently that one of the main requirements for the noble disciple is faith or confidence in the Buddha and the Dhamma. In contrast, the ordinary person either does not follow or respect those who are well-trained in the Dhamma at all, or does not do so to the same extent. Indeed, the noble disciple is at times defined precisely in terms of the ordinary person's characteristics that he is freed from. For example, it is explained that the noble disciple: “ . . . has no such disloyalty to the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha or immorality as that possessed by the uneducated manyfolk [ordinary person].”³⁸¹ This disregard for the Dhamma is demonstrated in their ignorance — we are told that the ordinary person:

“does not understand what things are fit for attention and what things are unfit for attention. Since that is so, he attends to those things unfit for attention and he does not attend to those things fit for attention.”³⁸²

“Attending to things that are unfit for attention” is characterised as various futile speculations about the past, the future, and the present, and various wrong views³⁸³ about the self. The problem with such speculations is that they lead to further craving and ignorance, which further propagates the cycle of suffering:

“When he attends to them, the unarisen taint of sensual desire arises in him and the arisen taint of sensual desire increases, the unarisen taint of being arises in him and the arisen taint of being increases, the unarisen taint of ignorance arises in him and the arisen taint of ignorance increases”³⁸⁴

Whereas the noble disciple gradually weakens and destroys the ‘taints’, (*āsava*s, a form of ignorance) through his knowledge and conduct, the ordinary person, through his failure to “attend to things that are fit for attention” and his engagement in wrong

³⁸⁰The inter-dependence of ignorance and craving is of fundamental importance in Nikāya thought, and will be discussed at greater length in relation to the question of view in chapter two.

³⁸¹S v 363; Woodward 317.

³⁸²M i 7; Bhikkhu Bodhi 92.

³⁸³Wrong view will be discussed in greater depth later, pp. 130-135.

³⁸⁴M i 7; Bhikkhu Bodhi 92.

views creates the conditions for further arising and increasing of the taints.³⁸⁵ Just as, in dependent origination, the Buddha describes a causal process that explains the existence and propagation of suffering, so the negative factors that lead from sense desires to bad conduct are also described as a causal process, grounded in the ignorance of the ordinary person. The Buddha describes how sense desires lead to sensuous perception, which in turn can lead to unskilful conduct: “Pursuing a sensuous quest, the untaught worldling practises wrong conduct in three ways: in deed, word and thought. Pursuing a malevolent, a cruel quest, the untaught wordling practises wrong conduct in these three ways (i.e. sense-questing, ill-will and cruelty).”³⁸⁶

In contrast, the noble disciple does comprehend what should be wisely attended to, and acts upon this, leading to the destruction of the taints:

“He, thinking, ‘This is anguish’ wisely attends ... ‘This is the origin of anguish’, wisely attends ... Because he wisely attends thus, the three fetters decline — wrong view as to own body, doubt, adherence to (wrongful) rites and ceremonies. These are called the taints to be got rid of by vision ...”³⁸⁷

Through control of the sense-organs, the noble disciple gets rid of the taints of sense-pleasures, and by endurance, avoidance and mental development he ultimately destroys all of the taints, and arrives at nibbāna.

Most other descriptions of the ordinary person revolve around his ignorance, often characterised by this attachment to wrong views which are both a product and a determinant of further craving and suffering. The ordinary person regards the five aggregates (*khandhas*) as the self, and engages in speculations about the status and destiny of the self³⁸⁸, and as a result suffers the concomitant distress when the five aggregates are disturbed by change.³⁸⁹ When, for example, a pleasurable feeling arises the ordinary person becomes addicted to it, and when it stops a painful feeling arises and he mourns and laments.³⁹⁰ He laments when inevitable states of ageing, sickness, death, destruction and ending occur; indeed, this is one of the hall-marks of the ordinary person: “This man is called an unlearned average man [ordinary person]; pierced by the poisoned dart of sorrow, he just torments himself.”³⁹¹ In failing to recognise the inherent misery in pursuing sense-pleasures, which are ultimately

³⁸⁵Ibid.

³⁸⁶S ii 151; Rhys Davids 106.

³⁸⁷Ibid.

³⁸⁸M i 135; Bhikkhu Bodhi 229, M iii 228; Bhikkhu Bodhi 1077, S iii 39; Woodward 36, 163, Woodward 140.

³⁸⁹M iii 227; Bhikkhu Bodhi 1077.

³⁹⁰M i 239; Bhikkhu Bodhi 334.

³⁹¹A iii 54; Hare 46.

impermanent and unsatisfactory, the ordinary person is likened to a cow that has got loose in a corn field: “the ignorant manyfolk [ordinary people], being uncontrolled in the sixfold sense sphere, eats its fill with ravenous delight among the five sensual pleasures.”³⁹² The ‘worldly conditions’ of gain, loss, fame, obscurity, blame, praise, contentment come to both the noble disciple and the ordinary person, but, unlike the noble disciple, the ordinary person does not see these factors as they really are, namely that they are impermanent, and therefore constantly strives for the positive aspects, resulting in *dukkha* when this striving is inevitably thwarted. Similarly, both the ordinary person and the noble disciple experience feelings, but the ordinary person chases after them, whilst the noble disciple does not cling to them.³⁹³ The same is true for thought and the mind — the ordinary person suffers because he identifies the mind with the self: “This that we call thought, that we call mind, that we call consciousness, by this the untaught manyfolk [ordinary people] are not able to feel repelled, to cease fancying it, to be freed from it. Why? Because it is what they cleave to as ‘mine’.”³⁹⁴ Anybody who thus regards the five aggregates as the self and fails to appreciate the impermanence of sense pleasures and so on is defined as a ordinary person:

“Such an one is called one of the untaught manyfolk [ordinary people], one fettered by the bonds of body, one bound to the inner and the outer, one who has not sighted the further shore, one who has not sighted the beyond, one who is born bound, who dies bound, one who from this world goes to the world beyond.”³⁹⁵

It is clear from these definitions that what defines a ordinary person is his ignorance, and that this ignorance fundamentally informs his conduct, which further propagates the cycle of suffering. This relationship of mutual interdependence between ignorance and conduct is reinforced by the claim that it is only by developing both skilful knowledge and conduct that the ordinary person could ever become a noble disciple, and gain liberation from suffering:

“If there were an end-maker by any other way than by knowledge-and-conduct, then the ordinary man would be an end-maker. Now, the ordinary man, living apart from knowledge-and-conduct, being unversed in conduct, knows not, sees not things as they really are. But if he be practised in conduct, he knows, he sees things as they really are. So knowing, so seeing, he is an end-maker.”³⁹⁶

³⁹²S iv 195; Woodward 128.

³⁹³S iv 206; Woodward 138.

³⁹⁴S ii 94; Rhys Davids 66.

³⁹⁵S iii 163; Woodward 140.

³⁹⁶A ii 163; Woodward 170.

To sum up, then, the 'ordinary person' is governed by ignorance. He or she is unskilled in the practices taught by the Buddha. As a result of his or her ignorance, the ordinary person does not see the inherent suffering to be found in identifying with the self, and therefore clings to this idea, and to various hopes and expectations about the self's destiny. Thus a negative causal cycle is set in motion by the ordinary person's ignorance. In contrast, the noble disciple has broken out of this negative causal cycle through his or her knowledge, and has set in motion a positive causal process. Let us now consider the noble disciple's characteristics.

Ariyasāvaka, 'the Noble Disciple'.

The noble disciple is freed from the ignorance that characterises the ordinary person. In the following formula that is repeated on numerous occasions in the *Majjhima Nikāya*, there is once again an emphasis on the causal process leading to wisdom and freedom from suffering, a process that begins with having trust in the teaching of the Dhamma:

“And how is there non-agitation due to non-clinging? Here a well-taught disciple [noble disciple] who has regard for the noble ones and is skilled and disciplined in their Dhamma, who has regard for true men and is skilled and disciplined in their Dhamma, does not regard material form as self, or self as possessed of material form, or material form in self, or self as in material form. That material form of his changes and becomes otherwise. With the change and becoming otherwise of material form, his consciousness is not preoccupied with the change of material form. Agitated mental states born of preoccupation with the change of material form do not arise together and remain obsessing his mind. Because his mind is not obsessed, he is not anxious, distressed, and concerned, and due to non-clinging he does not become agitated.”³⁹⁷

Unlike the ordinary person then, the noble disciple is endowed with faith or confidence in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, and has gained the liberating knowledge of things as they really are. In the *Samyutta Nikāya*, there is another set formula that is used to describe the noble disciple, which once again places emphasis on knowledge and insight:

“He is said to be an ariyan [noble] disciple who possesses view and insight, who has attained true dhamma, who sees the true dhamma, who is endowed with the knowledge of the learner (*sekha*), who is endowed with

³⁹⁷M iii 227; Bhikkhu Bodhi 1077. See also M i 137; Bhikkhu Bodhi 230.

the wisdom of the learner, who has the dhamma-ear and noble penetrating wisdom and stands knocking at the door of the deathless.”³⁹⁸

This formula is preceded by different criteria, all relating to insight. These criteria include “knowledge in doctrine and retrospective knowledge”³⁹⁹[i.e. he knows now and in the past decay and death, its uprising, ceasing and the way to its ceasing — in other words, the four noble truths], knowledge of each of the links of dependent origination and their arising, ceasing, and the way to their ceasing⁴⁰⁰; and knowledge of “as it really is the coming to pass and the passing away of the world.”⁴⁰¹

In contrast to the ordinary person, the noble disciple is unseduced by sense pleasures. He “sees as it really is with proper wisdom”⁴⁰² that the sense-fields are impermanent, and as a result knows how “sensual pleasures provide little gratification, much suffering, and much despair, and how great is the danger in them.”⁴⁰³

It is the noble disciple's knowledge of the way things really are, then, that ultimately distinguishes him or her from the ordinary person. He or she can see the truth of dependent origination and the four truths. As a result of this knowledge, the ordinary person does not identify with a view of self and therefore does not cling to sensual pleasures or suffer when any of the aggregates of his being alter for the worse.

There are four different categories of noble disciple; the 'streamwinner', the 'once-retuner, the 'never-returner', and the 'arahat'. Arahatsip is the highest level of noble discipleship. Each stage represents a progressive freedom from the sources and causes of suffering. These four types will now be considered.

The Four Types of Noble Disciple.

The four stages in the process of attaining liberation are each characterised by increased weakening of the bonds that cause suffering. In the *Saṅgīti Sutta*⁴⁰⁴ it is explained that there are ten fetters which bind the individual to the realm of *saṃsāra*. These are listed as follows:

The five lower fetters:

1. Personality belief
2. Doubt

³⁹⁸e.g. S ii 58; adapted from Rhys Davids 42.

³⁹⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰⁰S ii 43-4; Rhys Davids 34. S ii 80; Rhys Davids 56-7.

⁴⁰¹S ii 79; Rhys Davids 55.

⁴⁰²M iii 272; Bhikkhu Bodhi 1121.

⁴⁰³M i 91; Bhikkhu Bodhi 186.

⁴⁰⁴D iii 234-271; Walshe 479-510.

3. Attachment to rites and rituals
4. Sensual desire
5. Ill-will

The five higher fetters:

6. Craving for form
7. Craving for the formless
8. Conceit
9. Restlessness
10. Ignorance

The four types of noble disciple, corresponding to four stages of 'breakthrough' are described in terms of the successive breaking of these fetters. I will now look at each of the four types of person. Most attention will be given to the stream-winner as this stage represents the 'minimum requirement' for a noble disciple; the three further stages will be mentioned only briefly, for they only differ from the streamwinner stage in one or two respects.

The Streamwinner.

In the last chapter there was a description of the gradual path towards liberation, consisting of the cumulative practice of moral discipline, meditation and insight. The four types of person epitomise the 'fruits' or the final stages of the culmination of this path. The first stage is the stage of the stream-winner. In the case of the stream-winner, we are told that he or she has destroyed the three fetters of the personality belief or self-view, doubt, and attachment to rites and rituals, and this is sufficient for him or her to be reborn in one of the higher realms after death.⁴⁰⁵ In other words, the streamwinner has perfected moral conduct and meditation (in the manner described in the gradual path) to such an extent that he or she has attained a level of insight into reality 'as it really is': "having had a glimpse of reality and perceived the falsity of the self-belief, one is unshakeable and no more dependent on external aids."⁴⁰⁶ Having attained this 'glimpse of reality', the streamwinner knows for him or herself that what the Buddha has taught is true. He or she is thus freed from doubt about the purpose of following the path set forth by the Buddha. Having seen reality as it really is, he or she knows that clinging to the belief in the self is a perceptual mistake; the idea of an essential self is an illusion. The third fetter is attachment to rites and rituals. Thus the streamwinner no longer acts out of 'observance' for rules, but 'naturally' acts in the right way. In other words, he or she

⁴⁰⁵D i 156; Walshe 145. D iii 132; Walshe 435.

⁴⁰⁶Maurice Walshe, *Thus Have I Heard: The Long Discourses of the Buddha* (Wisdom Publications, London, 1987), p. 27.

has got rid of the ignorance that prompted unskilful behaviour and therefore does not need to adhere to rules in order to prevent misconduct. This serves to emphasise the idea that liberation in the Buddhist tradition represents a returning to a natural state of wisdom and compassion. When unskilful factors such as ignorance and craving are removed, then the 'liberated state' is 'uncovered'.

In the *Kindred Sayings on Stream-Winning* (*Sotāpatti-Saṃyutta*) in the *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, the qualities of a stream-winner are listed in detail. Common to virtually all the descriptions is the possession of four elements — three 'unwavering loyalties' or 'confidences' and moral practice. These appear to be pre-requisites for attaining the fruit of streamwinning. These four elements are given various different names in the Nikāyas: they are known as the "four limbs of stream-winning"⁴⁰⁷; the "four floods of merit, floods of good things that bring happiness"⁴⁰⁸; "mirror of the Dhamma"; the "four deva paths to the Devas, for the purification of impure beings, for the cleansing of foul beings" ; the "four desirable points of vantage"⁴⁰⁹. These four conditions, "if cultivated and made much of, conduce to the realising of the fruits of streamwinning"⁴¹⁰, and subsequently of the next stages of once-returning, of never-returning, and of arahatship. They also bring other more immediate benefits: "Blessed with these four things the Ariyan disciple [noble disciple] is also blessed with long life, both heavenly and human, blessed with beauty, blessed with happiness, blessed with good name, and blessed with sovereignty, both heavenly and human."⁴¹¹

The first of the four elements that one must possess in order to be a stream-winner is "unwavering confidence in the Buddha." This is characterised as the conviction regarding the Buddha that: "He is the Exalted One, an arahat, a perfectly enlightened universal Buddha, endowed with (perfect) knowledge and conduct, happy, a knower of the world, an unsurpassed guide of men who have to be restrained, a teacher of gods and men, a Buddha, an Exalted One".⁴¹²

Confidence in the Buddha must exist to some degree if one is to follow his teachings — one must have some faith in one's teacher if one is to take notice of what he says, particularly when those teachings are intended to loosen the grip of the deep-seated forces of ignorance and craving which dominate one's perception of reality. Similarly, confidence in the Buddha as 'perfect in knowledge and conduct' is emphasised because, as an enlightened being, he represents the embodiment of the

⁴⁰⁷e.g. S v 404; Woodward 345, 387; Woodward 334.

⁴⁰⁸e.g. S v 399; Woodward 342, 391; Woodward 336.

⁴⁰⁹S v 357; adapted from Woodward 312.

⁴¹⁰S v 410; Woodward 351.

⁴¹¹S v 391; Woodward 336.

⁴¹²S v 343; Woodward 297.

practice of his teachings, and is thus a testimony to both the efficacy of the teachings he propounds and the possibility of achieving nibbāna. The opposite to confidence is doubt (*vicikicchā*), which hinders development towards liberation. Not only is doubt one of the five lower fetters, but it is also one of the 'five hindrances' that can obstruct the development of mindfulness in meditation.⁴¹³ The streamwinner has abandoned doubt, and has full confidence in the Buddha's teachings.

The second, related confidence, is in the Buddha's teachings, the Dhamma. It is characterised by the faith that: "The dhamma is well-taught by the Exalted One, of advantage to this life, timeless, open to all, leading onwards (to nibbāna), understood for themselves by the wise".⁴¹⁴

The third confidence is in the community of monks and nuns and other fellow-practitioners, the sangha. This constitutes the belief that:

"Walking righteously is the Exalted One's Order of Disciples, walking uprightly, walking in the right way, walking dutifully is the Exalted One's Order of Disciples; namely, the four pairs of men, the eight sorts of men⁴¹⁵. That is the Exalted One's Order of Disciples. Worthy of honour are they, worthy of reverence, worthy of offerings, worthy of salutations with clasped hands, — a field of merit and unsurpassed for the world."⁴¹⁶

This third confidence is related to the first two — the order of disciples gets its whole *raison d'être* from the Buddha and the dhamma that he taught. Without confidence in the Buddha and dhamma, it would be impossible to have trust in a community that based their lives on these factors.

The fourth and final factor required before one can become a stream-winner follows the pragmatic tenor of much that we have seen so far, for it places emphasis on the moral practice expounded by the Buddha. Rather than entailing faith or confidence, this element requires that one is accomplished in moral conduct: "He is possessed of the moral practice loved by the *ariyans* [noble ones], conduct unbroken, consistent, spotless, unblemished, giving freedom, propounded by the wise, uncorrupted, conducive to concentration."⁴¹⁷ Moral conduct is both a pre-requisite and a result of progression along the path. As we shall see shortly, owing to the inter-relatedness of different elements of the path to liberation, ethical conduct provides a

⁴¹³For a list of the five hindrances, see for example M i 60; Bhikkhu Bodhi 151. The five hindrances are sensual desire, ill-will, sloth-and-torpor, restlessness and remorse, and doubt.

⁴¹⁴*Ibid.*

⁴¹⁵i.e. the four kinds of men (stream-winner etc.) and those experiencing the fruit of that category of conduct.

⁴¹⁶S v 343; Woodward 297.

⁴¹⁷*Ibid.*

basis for positive development of other path-elements, such as mindfulness and concentration. Once one has got to a certain level of attainment, then the factors that lead to unskilful moral conduct have been abandoned, and moral conduct occurs 'automatically'. We have already seen that the stream-winner has transcended the need for rules and rituals; he or she is in a natural state of ethical 'goodness'. It is this that constitutes the fourth 'limb' of stream-winning.

The streamwinner, then, has broken through the first three fetters; he or she also possesses the four 'loyalties', or 'limbs' of streamwinning. As his or her practice continues, the next stage of attainment is reached, the stage of the once-returner.

The Once-Returner.

The next stage towards liberation is the level of the once-returner, so called because one has only to have one more human rebirth before attaining nibbāna (compared with a maximum of seven for the streamwinner⁴¹⁸). The Once-Returner has greatly weakened the fourth and fifth fetters in addition to having destroyed the first three. Thus he or she has all but discarded the fetters of sensual desire and ill-will: "A monk who has abandoned the three fetters and has reduced his greed, hatred and delusion, becomes Once-Returner who, having returned to this world once more, will make an end of suffering."⁴¹⁹

The Never-Returner

As the name suggests, the never-returner will no longer be reborn in the human realm. He or she has completely discarded the five lower fetters, and is no longer attached in any way to this world. When the never-returner dies he or she will be reborn in a higher abode and will attain liberation from there: "A monk who has abandoned the five lower fetters takes a spontaneous rebirth [in a higher sphere] and, without returning from that world, gains enlightenment."⁴²⁰

The Arahāt

In the *Mahāli Sutta*, the arahāt is defined thus: "a monk through the extinction of the taints reaches in this very life the uncorrupted deliverance of mind, the deliverance through wisdom, which he has realised by his own insight."⁴²¹ The stage

⁴¹⁸See for example the *Janavasabha Sutta*, D ii 200-219, where a stream-winner in his seventh life expresses the desire to become a once-returner.

⁴¹⁹D i 156; Walshe 145.

⁴²⁰Ibid.

⁴²¹Ibid.

of becoming an *arahat*, then, is the culmination of the path set forth by the Buddha. It is characterised by complete freedom of all the fetters, and the destruction of all taints. Significant factors to note from the above description of the *arahat* is that it is through insight, through seeing the way things really are, that ignorance and the concomitant craving, clinging and suffering falls away. The individual who sees reality correctly does not suffer, for suffering arises out of ignorance. It is also significant that the 'deliverance' attained is not 'endowed' on the arahat by someone else, but is 'realised by his own insight.'⁴²² When an individual has reached the state of arahantship he has completed his task and knows: "Birth is finished, the holy life has been led, done is what had to be done, there is nothing further here."⁴²³ In the *Mahāli Sutta*, the Buddha is asked by Mahāli what the method is for the realisation of the four different stages of liberation, and the Buddha replies that it is the Eightfold Path that is "the path, the way to the realisation of these things."⁴²⁴ We will shortly consider the eightfold path in the light of the distinction between the ordinary person and the noble disciple. Before doing so, however, I wish to briefly consider another category of liberated being, the *paccekabuddha*. The *paccekabuddha* is an individual who has attained enlightenment by himself, without being taught. The figure of the *paccekabuddha* is interesting because it illustrates that one does not have to have heard the teaching of the Buddha in order to attain liberation.

The Paccekabuddha.

English translations of the term *paccekabuddha* emphasise the concept of a 'solitary' Buddha, one who has become enlightened by himself. There is also an emphasis on the fact that such an individual does not teach the dhamma after his enlightenment.⁴²⁵ The *paccekabuddha* is mentioned much less frequently in the Nikāyas than the four types of noble disciple. A comprehensive list of various references to *paccekabuddhas* and a study of the concept is found in Kloppenborg's work, *The Paccekabuddha*⁴²⁶. For the purposes of this study it is necessary only to summarise

⁴²²In the *Sampasādaniya Sutta* (D iii 99-116; Walshe 417-426), seven different types of arahant are described: the Both-Ways-Liberated, the Wisdom-Liberated, the Body-Witness, the Vision-Attainer, the Faith-Liberated, the Dhamma-Devotee, and the Faith-Devotee. (D iii 106). These different types emphasize the ways in which different character types come to the state of liberation - some, like the Dhamma and Faith Devotee, have a devotional attitude towards their practice, whereas others have a stronger emphasis on wisdom and insight, or indeed on visions. This demonstrates that, whilst ultimately the practices and insights leading to liberation are shared by all arahants, there are different approaches or emphases to the path of practice.

⁴²³D i 85; Walshe 108.

⁴²⁴D i 157; Walshe 146.

⁴²⁵See Ria Kloppenborg, *The Paccekabuddha: A Buddhist Ascetic* (Leiden, Brill, 1974), p. 1-2 for a detailed list of various definitions and translations of the term.

⁴²⁶*Ibid.*

these findings and point out that the *paccekabuddha* is an individual who has attained *arahatship* without ever having heard the teachings of a Buddha. I wish to emphasize two respects in which the concept of the *paccekabuddha* is significant. Firstly, it suggests that the three 'loyalties' in the Buddha, sangha and dhamma possessed by the four types of noble disciple are not absolutely necessary as a prerequisite for liberation. If there is no Buddha, then there can be no 'Buddhist' teachings (dhamma), and no followers of these teachings (sangha). Secondly, the concept of the *paccekabuddha* suggests that the universe has a certain objective causal structure that exists whether or not there is a Buddha to teach it. This lends support to the Buddha's claim that he is simply 'describing' the way to liberation and the way reality truly is, rather than the path being something of his 'invention'. The implication of this is that liberation is not something that is restricted only to 'Buddhists' or 'followers of the Buddha', because it can be attained when no Buddhas or Buddhist teachings exist.

These two points are important when applied to the context of the 'inter-faith debate', for they suggest that one does not have to be a follower of the Buddha in order to become liberated, in so far as it is possible to become liberated when no Buddha exists. However, although one may not be a 'follower' of the Buddha in the sense of responding to his specific teachings, there is another sense in which a *paccekabuddha* could be described as a 'follower' of the Buddha. The story of the Buddha's enlightenment describes how he followed a certain causal path of conduct that culminated in his awakening. I wish to suggest that any being who becomes enlightened has followed the same path of cause and effect, and is thus a 'follower' of the Buddha in the sense of unconsciously 'following in his footsteps', or treading the same path.⁴²⁷ The four types of noble disciple have an advantage over the would-be *paccekabuddha* in that they have a guide along this path in the shape of a Buddha, a 'map' or 'instructions' in the form of the dhamma, and the support of the sangha. The *paccekabuddha*, however, has none of these supports, but finds his own way along this path. Whichever method with which a disciple progresses along this path, I wish to suggest that the path is the same. I will now consider this notion of the path in greater detail before going on to consider the objective causal process that it describes and represents.

⁴²⁷The analogy of 'following in the Buddha's footsteps' is used by the Buddha himself in the *Cūlahatthipadopama Sutta*, M i 182 ff. Bhikkhu Bodhi 275 ff.

The Eightfold Path as the Distillation of Spiritual Practice.

So far we have examined many of the references throughout the Nikāyas to the different forms of noble disciple and how they differ from the descriptions of the ordinary person. The definitions have had many different emphases, and indeed throughout the Nikāyas, various different practices are identified as the way to the cessation of suffering. In the following section, these apparently disparate references will be tied together using the notion of the eightfold path, following the argument put forward by Gethin that the eightfold path represents the ‘complete distillation’ of the spiritual life. This will be followed by an examination of the two levels of achievement in the eightfold path, the noble and the ordinary which correspond to the attainments of the noble disciple and the ordinary person respectively. This will help to elucidate this fundamental spiritual distinction within the Nikāya world. Similarly the eightfold path will be used to illustrate further the differences between the ‘four types’ of ordinary person.

What is the Eightfold Path?

The Noble Eightfold Path is defined on a number of occasions in the Nikāyas as the Fourth Noble Truth. One such analysis and description of the eightfold path lies in the *Saccavibhaṅgasutta*⁴²⁸ (The Analysis on the Truths), where the path is described in detail. In this sutta, the first noble truth is described as “suffering” and the second noble truth is described as follows:

“It is craving, which brings renewal of being, is accompanied by delight and lust, and delights in this and that; that is, craving for sensual pleasures, craving for being, and craving for non-being. This is called the noble truth of the origin of suffering.”⁴²⁹

The third truth is characterised as:

“It is the remainderless fading away and ceasing, the giving up, relinquishing, letting go, and rejecting of that same craving.”⁴³⁰

The fourth truth, the eightfold path, is identified as the way that this stopping of anguish is achieved. There follows an analysis of all eight factors of the path. Right view is defined in this context as knowledge of the four noble truths.

⁴²⁸M iii 251-252; Bhikkhu Bodhi 1100-1101. An analysis is also found at S v 8-10; Woodward 7-9, and D ii 311-2; Walshe 348.

⁴²⁹M iii 250-1; Bhikkhu Bodhi 1099.

⁴³⁰M iii 251; Bhikkhu Bodhi 1099.

Right intention or thought is defined as the aspiration for renunciation, “non-ill will”, and “intention of non-cruelty”⁴³¹. In his analysis of right intention, Gethin argues that both right and wrong thought exist on a continuum — it is not an absolute or binary state: “wrong thought ranges from thoughts and desires that only subtly tend to desire, hatred or cruelty, to thoughts and ideas that are absorbed in and obsessed with these; right thought ranges from thoughts and ideas that only subtly tend to desirelessness, non-hatred or non-cruelty, to thoughts and ideas absorbed in and fully given to these.”⁴³²

Right Speech is “abstaining from false speech, abstaining from malicious speech, abstaining from harsh speech, abstaining from idle chatter.”⁴³³

Right Action is “abstaining from killing living beings, abstaining from taking what is not given, and abstaining from misconduct in sensual pleasures.” In the *Vibhaṅga* of the *Saṃyutta-Magga*, the third element of right action is defined as “refraining from non-celibacy”, thus giving a more specific definition of “sensual misconduct”.

Right Livelihood is defined as “abandoning wrong livelihood, and earning a living through right livelihood.”

Right Effort or Endeavour, refers to a state of affairs in which:

“a bhikkhu awakens zeal for the non-arising of unarisen evil unwholesome states, and he makes effort, arouses energy, exerts his mind, and strives. He awakens zeal for the abandoning of arisen evil unwholesome states ... for the arising of unarisen wholesome states ... for the continuance, non-disappearance, strengthening, increase, and fulfilment by development of arisen wholesome states ...”⁴³⁴

Right mindfulness is exhibited when:

“a bhikkhu abides contemplating the body as a body, ... feelings as feelings, ... mind as mind, ... mind-objects as mind-objects, ardent, fully aware, and mindful, having put away covetousness and grief for the world.”⁴³⁵

Finally, right concentration is exemplified when a monk:

⁴³¹Ibid.

⁴³²Gethin, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening*, p.194.

⁴³³M iii 251; Bhikkhu Bodhi 1099.

⁴³⁴M iii 252; Bhikkhu Bodhi 1100.

⁴³⁵Ibid.

“Quite secluded from sensual pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, a bhikkhu enters upon and abides in the first jhāna, which is accompanied by applied and sustained thought, with rapture and pleasure born of seclusion. With the stilling of applied and sustained thought, he enters upon and abides in the second jhāna, which has self-confidence and singleness of mind ... with rapture and pleasure born of concentration. With the fading away as well of rapture ... he enters upon and abides in the third meditation ... he enters upon and abides in the fourth meditation.”⁴³⁶

The Eightfold Path and Other Descriptions of the Way to Liberation.

As we have seen, there are many different practices listed in the Nikāyas that purport to lead to the status of stream-winner and, ultimately, arahat. For example, we have already seen in the *Sotāpatti-Saṃyutta*, there is a strong emphasis on the four loyalties or ‘faiths’ as a means as attaining liberation, whereas the *paccekabuddha* can attain liberation without faith in the Buddha, dhamma and sangha. Elsewhere it is the four foundations of mindfulness that are described as the means for liberation:

“This is the direct path for the purification of beings, for the surmounting of sorrow and lamentation, for the disappearance of pain and grief, for the attainment of the true way, for the realisation of nibbāna - namely, the four foundations of mindfulness.”⁴³⁷

In the *Ānāpāna-Saṃyuttam*, the “Ariyan way, the best of ways, the Tathāgata’s way of life” is identified simply with mindfulness of breathing. In the *Pāsādika Sutta*⁴³⁸, the ‘holy life’ is constituted by the so-called seven sets: the four foundations of mindfulness, the four right efforts, the four roads to power or bases of success, the five spiritual faculties, the five powers, the seven factors of awakening⁴³⁹ and finally the eightfold path.

In addition to all these practices that lead to nibbāna, the eightfold path is frequently and consistently described as the way to liberation: in the *Magga-saṃyutta*, the aim of the Holy life is described as “dispassion”, the destruction of the fetters “the uprooting of tendency”, the “way out”, the destruction of the taints, release by

⁴³⁶ M iii 252; Bhikkhu Bodhi 1101.

⁴³⁷ M i 55-6; Bhikkhu Bodhi 145. Also S v 167; Woodward 167. D ii 290; Walshe 335. See Gethin, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening*, pp.59-68 for discussion of the significance of the term *ekāyana*.

⁴³⁸ D iii 117-41; Walshe 427-489; also in the *Sāmagāmasutta*, Mii 243-51; 853-860, and the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, D ii 119-20; Walshe 252-3.

⁴³⁹ Namely mindfulness, investigation-of-states, energy, rapture, tranquility, concentration, equanimity. See for example M iii 276; Bhikkhu Bodhi 1124.

knowledge, knowing and seeing and “final emancipation without clinging”⁴⁴⁰. The vehicle — the “way and practice” for achieving all these things is the eightfold path. It is referred to as the ‘highest life’, the ‘holy life’⁴⁴¹, the life of the recluse⁴⁴², and has as its aim the destruction of greed, hatred and delusion.⁴⁴³ In the same sutta, the four fruits of the path are identified as the four types of person, (stream-winner etc.), and once again the path is completely identified with the way to achieve the cessation of suffering:

“By whomsoever the Ariyan [noble] eightfold way is neglected, by them is neglected the Ariyan eightfold way that leads to the utter destruction of Ill [suffering]. By whomsoever the Ariyan eightfold way is undertaken, by them is undertaken the Ariyan eightfold way that leads to the utter destruction of Ill.”⁴⁴⁴

Earlier in the *Magga-Saṃyutta*, the path is described as the ‘best of chariots’, ‘dhamma-chariot’, “unsurpassed for its conquest in the fight”⁴⁴⁵. This idea of the eightfold path as a vehicle is, as Gethin points out, reinforced when the simile of a raft is applied to the eightfold path. Early in the *Magga-Saṃyutta*, the eight factors of the path are said to conduce to going to the further shore when they are “cultivated and made much of”⁴⁴⁶, and in the *Salāyatanika Saṃyutta*, the eightfold path is likened to a raft which a man uses to get from the lower shore, fraught with dangers (representing the world of samsara), to the safety of the further shore, nibbāna.⁴⁴⁷ In the *Sotāpatti-Saṃyutta*, as we have already seen, the eightfold path itself is referred to as the ‘stream’ that has been won, this time characterised by the connotation of being the stream or current that will carry one inexorably to nibbāna.

These passages portray an unequivocal message that the fulfilment of the eightfold path is the way to the cessation of dukkha. What, though, of the references to other practices that lead to cessation? With reference to the seven sets⁴⁴⁸, for example, the eightfold path is but one of the sets, and the fact that the other six factors are mentioned as separate sets presumably means that they represent practices that are ‘other’ to, and thus additional to, the eightfold path, which, when all cultivated

⁴⁴⁰S v 23 ff.; Woodward 24 ff.

⁴⁴¹S v 23-5. Woodward translates ‘*brahmacariyam*’ as ‘the best practice’ in this context (Kindred Sayings, Vol. 5, p. 24.)

⁴⁴²Ibid.

⁴⁴³Ibid.

⁴⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁴⁵S v 2; adapted from Woodward 4-6.

⁴⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁴⁷S iv 172-5; Woodward 107-110. M i 134-5; Bhikkhu Bodhi 228-9.

⁴⁴⁸See p. 117, above.

together, constitute the *brahmacariya* that will take one to nibbāna. However, as we have seen, the eightfold path is clearly considered to be enough, when cultivated on its own, to take the practitioner to nibbāna. Conversely, we have also seen how individual sections of the path — for example, mindfulness — are also said to lead to nibbāna, without reference to any other limb of the path, whilst in the *Sotāpatti Sutta*, there are many references in which the description of the practices of those who are guaranteed liberation makes no mention of the eightfold path, but only refers to other qualities and practices such as the four loyalites. What, then, is the status of the eightfold path, and how are these apparent inconsistencies to be accounted for?

Gethin argues that the eightfold path has a privileged status as the distillation of the complete spiritual life, under which all other practices can be subsumed. He argues for this in various ways. Firstly, he maintains that whilst at times the other six of the seven sets are spoken of as paths to the cessation of suffering, “it is surely true that in the case of the *ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo* [noble eightfold path] this kind of treatment is rather more thoroughgoing.”⁴⁴⁹, and argues that in fact “it is in part precisely by association with the *ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo* that the other sets are treated in a parallel fashion.”⁴⁵⁰ He explains that whilst the eightfold path is mentioned explicitly as the fourth noble truth on six occasions in the Nikāyas⁴⁵¹, there are very many passages where, although the four noble truths are not explicitly mentioned, the format of suffering, arising, ceasing and the way going to the ceasing is used, and the eightfold path features in these sections. In the *Magga-Saṃyutta*, when the Buddha is questioned by wanderers of other schools, he describes the eightfold path as the way to achieve full understanding of suffering, which is the purpose of living the holy life under him.⁴⁵² It is thus presented as the “straightforward solution, complete in itself”⁴⁵³ to dukkha, the problem that the Buddha is dealing with. Gethin goes on to argue that as the “essence of the spiritual life”, the eightfold path also operates as a yardstick by which the teachings of other schools can be evaluated. He cites a passage in the *Dīgha Nikāya* where the Buddha describes the presence of the eightfold path as the determinant of whether there are any stream-winners, once-returners, never-returners or ascetics:

“In whatever Dhamma and discipline the Noble Eightfold Path is not found, no ascetic is found of the first, the second, the third or fourth grade. But such ascetics can be found ... in a Dhamma and discipline where the

⁴⁴⁹Gethin, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening*, p. 202.

⁴⁵⁰Ibid.

⁴⁵¹Ibid., p.201 - D ii 311; Bhikkhu Bodhi 348. M iii 251; Bhikkhu Bodhi 1100. S v 421-2.

Woodward 358. S v 424; Woodward 362.

⁴⁵²e.g., S v 2; Woodward 6.

⁴⁵³Gethin, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening*, p. 203

Eightfold Path *is* found. Those other schools are devoid of [true] ascetics; but if in this one the monks were to live the life to perfection, the world would not lack for Arahants.”⁴⁵⁴

How does the *paccekabuddha* fit into this idea that only traditions in which the eightfold path features are liberative? As we have seen, the *paccekabuddha* has no access to the Buddha's teachings, including his teaching of the eightfold path. If he has no access to the teachings about the eightfold path, how can he become liberated? The existence of *paccekabuddhas* suggests that the eightfold path is not just an explicit teaching, but a description of a certain causal process. The *paccekabuddha* is able to become liberated without hearing the teaching of the Buddha because he has fulfilled the factors of the path by himself. He has found the path without the guidance of the Buddha. This serves to reinforce the idea that the eightfold path is the Buddha's description of an objectively existing process; it is not just a teaching of his 'invention'. When the Buddha taught that there can only be liberated beings in a tradition where the eightfold path is found, he presumably means that people are only liberated when the eightfold path is followed and fulfilled. The existence of *paccekabuddhas* suggests that there does not necessarily have to be explicit *teaching* of the eightfold path in order for a tradition to produce noble disciples.

The Spiritual Division of 'Transcendent' and 'Ordinary' in the Eightfold Path.

Let us summarise what we have examined so far. In the fourth noble truth, the Buddha describes the way to the cessation of suffering as the Noble Eightfold Path. All the various practices and insights that are connected with the path to nibbāna can be subsumed under one or other of the limbs of the eightfold path, as factors that contribute to the eventual fulfilment of morality, wisdom and concentration. Throughout the Nikāyas there is a constant dichotomy between those who have perfected the eightfold path sufficiently to have got rid of wrong views and practices and be guaranteed eventual attainment of the freedom of nibbāna, and those who have not yet attained this degree of development. Those in the former category are referred to as 'noble' or 'noble disciples', and include stream-winners, once-returners, never-returners and arahats. Those in the category of 'ordinary person' have not perfected the factors of the eightfold path to a sufficient degree to be guaranteed liberation. The knowledge attained by the noble disciple is said to be 'transcendent', in contrast to the

⁴⁵⁴D ii 151; Walshe 268.

knowledge of the ordinary person who is still bound to saṃsāra, and possesses knowledge that is 'ordinary' or 'worldly'. This same dichotomy exists in terms of the elements of the eightfold path — when each part of the path is perfected so that it is clearly seen, practised and understood it is termed 'noble'. As Gethin explains, the eightfold path refers to both the process of spiritual development, and its fulfilment:

“In the first place, the *ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo* [noble eightfold path] subsumes all other spiritual practice; it is, as it were, the whole of the spiritual life. Secondly, as complete and perfect spiritual practice, it is the ultimate form of spiritual practice; it is what the bhikkhu aspires to; it is the goal, the end, the culmination of the spiritual quest. The *ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo* is the transformation of view, thought, speech, action, livelihood, striving, mindfulness and concentration into right view, right thought etc. Thus the *ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo* is at once where one wishes to arrive at, and the way one must go to get there. For the destination is not exactly something different from the journey; where one arrives is only the culmination of the way one has come.”⁴⁵⁵

The clearest exposition of this noble/ordinary distinction lies in the *Mahācattārīsaka Sutta* of the *Majjhima Nikāya*⁴⁵⁶. This sutta gives a very useful exposition on the path and the relatedness of the eight different factors, so it will be helpful to undertake a detailed analysis of it. The sutta begins with the Buddha teaching his disciples about “ariyan right concentration”, with its supports and equipment. These ‘supports and equipment’ are the other seven factors of the path, namely ariyan right view, thought, speech, action, livelihood, endeavour, mindfulness. This suggests that ariyan right concentration exists not on its own, but in connection with, supported and nourished by, the other factors of the path.

Throughout the *Mahācattārīsaka Sutta* there is a strong emphasis on right view. In relation to the “supports and equipment” of noble right concentration, the Buddha emphasises that right view is the fore-runner of the other elements. In this respect, right view is defined as recognising wrong view as wrong view, and right view as right view. Wrong view is defined as the opinion that:

“There is nothing given, nothing offered, nothing sacrificed; no fruit or result of good and bad actions; no this world, no other world; no mother, no father; no beings who are reborn spontaneously; no good and virtuous recluses and brahmins in the world who have realised for themselves by

⁴⁵⁵Gethin, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening*, p. 207.

⁴⁵⁶M iii 71-8; Bhikkhu Bodhi 934-40.

direct knowledge and declare this world and the other world.' This is wrong view."⁴⁵⁷

Right view in the sense of distinguishing right from wrong comes first in the context of each factor of the path. For instance, it is right view that recognises wrong action (i.e. taking life, taking the not-given and sexual misconduct) as wrong action, and right action as right action.⁴⁵⁸

In each case, there is a distinction made between two types of right view, that which "is affected by taints, partaking of merit, ripening on the side of attachment."⁴⁵⁹ and right view that is "noble, taintless, supramundane, a factor of the path."⁴⁶⁰ With each section of the path, the same distinction is made between the factor with taints, and the noble factor, the component of the way. As an example of this format, which is the same for all eight factors, let us look at right speech. Right view comes first insofar as it distinguishes wrong speech from right speech. Right speech is twofold — in the first place it is abstaining from wrong speech, (i.e. lying, slanderous speech, harsh speech, and gossiping), and this comes under the category of right speech with taints, on the side of merit, leading to rebirth. The second form is right speech that is "noble, taintless, supramundane, a factor of the path" and is characterised as "the desisting from the four kinds of verbal misconduct, the abstaining, refraining, abstinence from them in one whose mind is noble, whose mind is taintless, who possesses the noble path and is developing the noble path."⁴⁶¹ After this exposition of the two different sorts of right speech, it is explained how the path elements of right endeavour and mindfulness are involved in the cultivation of right speech in addition to right view:

"One makes an effort to abandon wrong speech and to enter upon right speech: this is one's right effort. Mindfully one abandons wrong speech, mindfully one enters upon and abides in right speech: this is one's right mindfulness. Thus these three states run and circle around right speech, that is, right view, right effort, and right mindfulness."⁴⁶²

The same formula is followed for each of the eight limbs of the path. Gethin discusses the inter-connectedness of the different elements of the path:

"While right view has precedence because of its function of knowing and seeing what is wrong and causing what is right to arise, right view must be

⁴⁵⁷M iii 71-2; Bhikkhu Bodhi 934.

⁴⁵⁸M iii 74; Bhikkhu Bodhi 934.

⁴⁵⁹M iii 72; Bhikkhu Bodhi 935.

⁴⁶⁰Ibid.

⁴⁶¹M iii 74; Bhikkhu Bodhi 936.

⁴⁶²M iii 74; Bhikkhu Bodhi 937.

supported by right striving and right mindfulness. Thus ...right view must in some sense lead the way because it is what 'sees', but three *dhammas* ['things'], namely right view, right striving and right mindfulness, continually interact with the other factors in order to promote them in their 'right' aspect."⁴⁶³

The distinction between the ordinary understanding of the path with taints and the endowment with noble factors is very important, for they are treated as two stages in the attainment of the eightfold path. Gethin summarises this distinction as follows:

"First there is the turning away from wrong view etc., and the turning towards right view etc. that are of the ordinary skilful variety. Secondly there is the attainment of right view, etc., as noble, without *āsavas* [taints], *lokuttara* [transcendent], a factor of the path. It is precisely this stage that must be understood as *ariyo sammā-samādhī sa-upaniso sa-parikkhāro* [noble right concentration with supports and equipment]"⁴⁶⁴

In contrast to the approach in which the elements of the path are seen as working together, the stages of the path are explained in terms of a consecutive pattern as the *Mahācattārīsaka Sutta* progresses:

"In one of right view, right intention comes into being; in one of right intention, right speech comes into being; in one of right speech, right action comes into being; in one of right action, right livelihood comes into being; in one of right livelihood, right effort comes into being; in one of right effort, right mindfulness comes into being; in one of right mindfulness, right concentration comes into being; in one of right concentration, right knowledge comes into being; in once of right knowledge, right deliverance comes into being. Thus, bhikkhus, the path of the disciple in higher training possesses eight factors, the arahant possesses ten factors."⁴⁶⁵

How is this contrast between the 'consecutive' approach and the 'simultaneous' approach to be explained? In the case of the consecutive approach, it is important to notice that, at the end of the section, a distinction is made between path for a "disciple in higher training", and the arahant's path. A *sekha* or 'learner' is one who is in possession of the noble or transcendent (*ariyan*) eightfold path, but still has more to do, more to perfect. He is contrasted with the 'perfected one' who is an *arahat*, and who has not only perfected all eight factors of the path, but has also developed two further ones, right knowledge and right freedom. Thus the learner/perfected one (or

⁴⁶³Gethin, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening*, p. 219.

⁴⁶⁴Gethin, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening*, p. 218.

⁴⁶⁵M iii 76; Bhikkhu Bodhi 938.

adept) distinction is not between those who are developing ordinary factors of the path and those who are possessed of the noble path, but is a hierarchy within the group of those who have developed the noble factors. It is a distinction between the stream-winner, the once-returner, and the never-returner on the one hand, and the *arahat* on the other. The *sekha* is described as one who is “imperfectly possessed of right view” and all the other factors of the path.⁴⁶⁶ Gethin argues that this particular section of the *Mahācattārīsaka Sutta*, where all the factors of the path are described sequentially, as a description of how one who is already endowed with the eight stages in their noble form, is to bring right knowledge and freedom into existence and therefore become an *arahat*: “...once again right view is said to lead the way in the final and absolute wasting away of the ten items in their wrong aspects, and their coming to full development in their right aspects.”⁴⁶⁷

To sum up, then, the noble eightfold path can be seen as the distillation of the spiritual life, not only because it encompasses the many different areas of spiritual practice that must be attained in order to attain liberation, but also because it represents both the culmination of spiritual practice (in its perfected, transcendent state), and the course by which this attainment is achieved. As the culmination of the spiritual life it thus represents a yardstick against which spiritual aspirants can be judged. The *arahat*, as a perfected being, has not only attained perfection of all the eight stages of the path, but also has cultivated the two additional limbs of right knowledge and freedom. The noble disciple has attained the eight stages in their noble form — he has each element that is “ariyan [noble], taintless, supermundane, a component of the Way”, but he yet has more to perfect. This understanding of the noble eightfold path suggests that there are, in fact, degrees of noble, transcendent right view⁴⁶⁸, speech and so on, but nevertheless the ‘crucial spiritual breakthrough’ has been made insofar as the practitioner has perfected the elements to such a degree as to be bound irrevocably to the eventual attainment of nibbāna.

The Causality of Liberation

So far, there has been a discussion of the spiritual division of ordinary and transcendent in the Nikāyas, and how this relates to the eightfold path, which can be viewed as the ‘distillation’ of the Buddha’s teaching. I wish to close this chapter by emphasising the idea that the eightfold path and the rest of the Buddha’s teachings are

⁴⁶⁶S v 14; Woodward 13. For further definitions of *sekha* see: S v 175; Woodward 153-4. S v 229ff. Woodward 204ff. S v 327; Woodward 327.

⁴⁶⁷Gethin, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening*, p. 220.

⁴⁶⁸This is an argument that is vehemently opposed by Mascfield in his book, *Divine Revelation in Pāli Buddhism* (Colombo, Sri Lankan Institute of Traditional Studies, 1980)

not just subjects of his invention, but a description of the nature of reality. What is being described, or rather presupposed, in the Buddha's teaching, is a causal process, a certain structure of reality. There is plenty of evidence for the "causality of liberation" throughout the Nikāyas. In the following passage from the *Anguttara Nikāya*, concentration is seen as the causal factor that allows liberating knowledge and insight to arise: "... in the absence of right mental concentration and in the case of one not endowed with right mental concentration, the cause is absent for (the production of) the knowledge and insight of things as they really are."⁴⁶⁹ It is a law of the world, a fact of life, that insight follows on from concentration: "It is in the nature of things (*dhammatā*) that a person in a state of concentration knows and sees what really is."⁴⁷⁰ The fact that non-attachment follows automatically from 'seeing the way things really are' also demonstrates this 'salvific causation': "A person who knows and sees things as they really are need not make an effort of the will, (saying), 'I shall become disinterested'; it is of the nature of things that a person who knows and sees becomes disinterested."⁴⁷¹

The *Dantabhūmi Sutta* provides some helpful analogies to illustrate the causal law that operates to bring the factors of the path to their positive fruition. The Sutta begins with Prince Jayasena asking one of the Buddha's disciples, Aggivessana, to teach him the Dhamma. Aggivessana declines, because he knows that the Prince will not be able to understand it, and when he is eventually persuaded to teach it, his fears are realised and the Prince fails to understand. When Aggivessana tells this to the Buddha, the Buddha is not surprised:

"Aggivessana, how is it possible that Prince Jayasena, living in the midst of sensual pleasures, enjoying sensual pleasures, being devoured by thoughts of sensual pleasures, being consumed by the fever of sensual pleasures, bent on the search for sensual pleasures, could know, see or realise that which must be known through renunciation, seen through renunciation, attained through renunciation, realised through renunciation? That is impossible."⁴⁷²

He illustrates this story with an analogy of two friends who go to a mountain - one climbs to the summit and the other stays at the bottom. When the man on the summit describes the beautiful view that he can see, his friend at the bottom does not believe him, and claims that it is impossible that such a view can be seen. In response, the man on the summit leads his sceptical friend up the mountain, and there he sees the view from himself, and explains that "because I was obstructed by this high mountain ... I

⁴⁶⁹A iii 200; translated by K.N. Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theories of Knowledge*, p. 420.

⁴⁷⁰A v 3; Jayatilleke p.421.

⁴⁷¹A v 303; Jayatilleke, p. 421.

⁴⁷²M iii 130; Bhikkhu Bodhi, 990.

did not see what was there to be seen.”. So it is, explains the Buddha, with *ariyan* right view - “Prince Jayasena is obstructed, hindered, blocked, and enveloped by a still greater mass than this - the mass of ignorance.”⁴⁷³

This simile is important on two levels - firstly it demonstrates that although *ariyan* right view is simply seeing what is really the case; secondly it illustrates how this insight is gained from a particular point of vantage that is the culmination of a certain path of practice. Certain conditions must be fulfilled in order to have this insight. Thus although it is all around him, the ordinary person cannot see the way things really are because his insight is obscured by 'the mass of ignorance', an ignorance that is a causal result of his immersion in the world of sense pleasures. One cannot simply gain right view at will, for it is the culmination of a course of training. In a further simile, the Buddha likens each stage of the gradual development formula to different stages in the process of taming a wild elephant - the elephant tamer has to work gradually and patiently before the creature is “rid of all faults and defects, purged of all flaws.”⁴⁷⁴

This idea of the existence of a certain 'causality of liberation' is supported by Gethin who suggests that both the eightfold path and dependent origination are descriptions of a certain 'law of nature'. Gethin notes that, towards the end of the *Mahācattārīsaka Sutta*, the presentation of the factors of the path bears a significant resemblance to that of dependent origination. The sutta takes its name ('The Great Forty') from the classification of the ten stages of the path (the eight limbs of the eightfold path, plus Right Freedom and Right Knowledge which are perfected by the *arahat*) into forty sections, twenty concerning 'wrong' (*micchā*) elements and twenty concerning 'right' (*sammā*) ones. Each element is described as the element itself, and the states that arise as a consequence of its existence. For example, wrong view is one item on the list, and “those various evil unskilled states that arise conditioned by wrong view.”⁴⁷⁵ is another. Each wrong element is described as being 'worn away' by the corresponding right element, which lead to various skilful results. Thus altogether there are forty items. Significantly, the lists of both right and wrong elements begin with view, which set in motion the respective cycles of skilful and unskilful conduct. Gethin points out that this treatment of right and wrong view and its relation to the other factors in the *Mahācattārīsaka Sutta* is echoed in the opening sutta of the *Magga Samyutta*:

“Ignorance comes first . . . in the attaining of unskilful *dhammas*, after [come] lack of self-respect and disregard for consequence. For one given

⁴⁷³M iii 131; Bhikkhu Bodhi, 991.

⁴⁷⁴M iii 133; Bhikkhu Bodhi 993.

⁴⁷⁵M iii 76; Gethin's translation, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening*, p. 221.

to ignorance, for one who is ignorant, . . . wrong view appears; for one of wrong view, wrong thought . . . wrong speech . . . wrong action . . . wrong livelihood . . . wrong striving . . . wrong mindfulness . . . wrong concentration appears. Knowledge comes first . . . in the attaining of skilful *dhammas*; after [come] self-respect and regard for consequence. For one given to knowledge, for one who has knowledge . . . right view appears . . . right concentration appears. ⁴⁷⁶

Gethin argues that this treatment of the cycles of good and bad conduct resembles the positive and negative cycles of dependent origination⁴⁷⁷ insofar as right view is positioned at the beginning of the positive cycle, and wrong view at the negative, in the same way as ignorance comes first in the sequence of dependent origination, conditioning the whole cycle of *dukkha*, and the cessation of ignorance enables this cycle of suffering to cease:

“The significance of this is, I think, that we might speak of the law of *paṭicca-samuppāda* [dependent origination] in the *Nikāyas*, and also of the law of the eight-factored path. These are in a sense two aspects of essentially the same thing, namely *dhamma*. According to early Buddhist literature, the law of *paṭicca-samuppāda* is not something that can be avoided, it is not something that there is any choice about; it is the law of the world and endures whether or not a Tathagata arises in the world.⁴⁷⁸ Either the cycle of *paṭicca-samuppāda* will tend towards the accumulation of 'this mass of *dukkha*', or it will tend towards its cessation; it cannot be otherwise. The 'law of the eight-factored path' can be understood similarly. The eight factors embrace eight essential aspects of existence - eight aspects that cannot be avoided. As long as these eight aspects are *sammā* or 'right' they continue to interact 'properly' and move in a skilful direction towards the cessation of *dukkha*. When they are *micchā* or 'wrong' they interact wrongly and move away from the cessation of suffering. What ultimately issues from the skilful interaction or cycle is the *ariyo aṭṭhaṅgiko maggo* itself. ⁴⁷⁹

This idea of the eightfold path describing an objectively-existing causal process has support elsewhere in the *Nikāyas*. In the *Mahāmāluṅkyaputta Sutta*, the Buddha tells Ānanda that anybody who abandons the five lower fetters (becomes a noble disciple) will have done so through fulfilment of the path:

⁴⁷⁶S v 1-2 Gethin's translation. *The Buddhist Path to Awakening*, p. 221.

⁴⁷⁷Gethin cites S ii 1 as an example.

⁴⁷⁸S ii 25; Gethin, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening*, p. 221.

⁴⁷⁹Gethin, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening*, p. 221.

“There is a path, Ānanda, a way to the abandoning of the five lower fetters; that anyone, without coming to that path, to that way, shall know or see or abandon the five lower fetters - this is not possible. Just as when there is a great tree standing possessed of heartwood, it is not possible that anyone shall cut out its heartwood without cutting through its bark and sapwood, so too there is a path ... this is not possible.”⁴⁸⁰

To summarise, then, the eightfold path describes both a causal process and the fulfilment of this process. It describes a 'law of nature' or a 'law of the mind' which, like dependent origination, operates objectively and is part of the nature of things.

All these factors serve to increase the impression that the Buddha's teaching, the Dhamma, presupposes a certain objective causal structuring of reality. The Buddha has attained insight of how this reality operates, and it is this that qualifies him to teach the path to liberation. The proximity to liberation of any individual depends on how much they have set this causal process going in a 'positive' direction. Although it is advantageous to have the Buddha's guidance on how to fulfil this process, it is possible to do so without hearing the teaching of the Buddha, as demonstrated in the concept of the *paccekabuddha*. All liberated beings will have fulfilled those aspects of discipline and conduct that are epitomised in the eightfold path. This can be illustrated with an analogy; anybody who is physically fit will have an efficient cardio-vascular system and strong muscles as a result of carrying out a certain course of exercise. It is a law of nature that this is so, and that all the different elements of fitness are closely inter-related. For example, one cannot increase the efficiency of one's heart without increasing the strength or efficiency of certain muscle groups, as it is by means of exercising these muscle groups that the heart grows stronger. Similarly, a stronger, more efficient heart leads to more effective oxygen distribution; all the factors of fitness are inter-related, and it is a 'law of nature' that this is so. An analogous situation occurs with the spiritual development epitomised in the eightfold path. It is in the nature of things that certain conduct will lead to certain specific results, and that the development of one aspect leads to the development of another. The Buddha has complete understanding of this causal process; to stretch the fitness analogy a little further, the Buddha has attained the ultimate level of fitness and is the best qualified teacher, with the most effective course of training.

⁴⁸⁰M i 435; Bhikkhu Bodhi 539.

Summary

In this chapter the spiritual distinction between the 'ordinary person' and the 'noble disciple' has been examined with reference to the noble eightfold path as the 'distillation' of spiritual practice. It has been argued that the eightfold path represents part of a certain causal structure of reality, of which the Buddha had full and complete insight.

In the next chapter, there will be a detailed analysis of the Buddha's teachings on one element of the path to liberation, that of view. This area has been chosen for particular analysis because of its relevance to 'inter-faith' issues. For it is often on the area of views that the Buddhist tradition differs from other teachings, and on which religions in general are at odds with each other.

CHAPTER FOUR: The Role of View in the Liberation Process

In this chapter, we will look at right and wrong view as it is presented in the Nikāyas. This is important because understanding the Buddha's explanation of view and the role it plays in the mind helps to explain his encounters with recluses and brahmins of differing views. It also helps to elucidate the criteria that must be satisfied if one is to become an noble disciple and, ultimately, an arahant. In the Nikāyas there are three different kinds of view (*diṭṭhi*): wrong view, lower or ordinary (*lokiya*) right view, and transcendent or *ariyan* (*lokuttara*) right view. The two different levels of right view correspond to the transcendent/ordinary distinction that is found throughout the Nikāyas. In other words, ordinary right view is the province of the ordinary person and noble or *ariyan* right view is the province of the noble disciple. This chapter will be focused on three suttas that are devoted to the issue of view — the first two, the *Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta* and the *Mahācattārīsaka Sutta* provide definitions of right and wrong view, with the *Mahācattārīsaka Sutta* focusing on the difference between ordinary and transcendent right view. These definitions will be supplemented with references from other suttas. The section on wrong view will also involve a lengthy examination of the *Brahmajāla Sutta*, where the Buddha analyses and dismisses various speculative views and the world. This sutta is very important on two levels — firstly because it demonstrates the Buddha's attitude to the views which are at odds with his teaching, but more importantly, because it clearly illustrates that it is the affective, psychological aspect of views that prompts the Buddha's judgement, not just their cognitive content. This is particularly important in the context of this thesis because much of the focus of interfaith debate is on doctrinal differences or conflicting views about the way the universe operates. It is particularly pertinent, then, to consider the Buddha's attitude to such questions.

Wrong View and 'Ordinary' Right View.

In the *Mahācattārīsaka Sutta* wrong view is defined as the belief that:

“There is nothing given, nothing offered, nothing sacrificed; no fruit or result of good and bad actions; no this world, no other world; no mother, no father; no beings who are reborn spontaneously; no good and virtuous recluses in the world who have realised for themselves by direct knowledge and declare this world and the other world.’ This is wrong view.”⁴⁸¹

⁴⁸¹M iii 72; Bhikkhu Bodhi 934. The same characterisation of wrong view is found in the *Sāleyyaka Sutta*, M i 287; Bhikkhu Bodhi 381.

Right view of the ‘lower sort’, or “right view that is affected by taints (*āsava*s), partaking of merit, ripening on the side of attachment”⁴⁸² is the opposite of wrong view, namely the belief that there are fruits and results of bad actions, there are good and virtuous recluses in this world, and so on.

Views wrong because of the Negative Causal Cycle they Promote.

In chapter three we examined the notion of the factors of the eightfold path — in both its ordinary and transcendent aspects — being inter-related, and to appreciate the role of both right and wrong view it is perhaps misleading to consider either completely on its own. For example, wrong view and ‘lower’ right view are put in context in the *Sāleyyaka Sutta* where it is explained that wrong view is but one element of ten sorts of “conduct not in accordance with the dhamma” (*adhammacariyā*)⁴⁸³. Of these ten, taking life, taking the not-given (or stealing), and sexual misconduct come under the category of “bodily conduct not in accordance with the dhamma”; speaking falsehood, malicious speech, harsh speech and idle gossip are characterised as “verbal conduct not in accordance with the dhamma”; and covetousness, hatred or ill-will, and wrong view are the three types of “mental conduct not in accordance with the dhamma.” It is conduct in relation to these ten categories that determines whether one gains a good or a bad rebirth:

“Householders, it is by reason of conduct not in accordance with the Dhamma, by reason of unrighteous conduct that some beings here, on the dissolution of the body, after death, reappear in states of deprivation, in an unhappy destination, in perdition, even in hell. It is by reason of conduct in accordance with the Dhamma, by reason of righteous conduct that some beings here, on the dissolution of the body, after death, reappear in a happy destination, even in the heavenly world.”⁴⁸⁴

It is clear from this sutta, then, that wrong view and ‘lower’ right view operate causally in the realm of *saṃsāric* existence, determining the quality of rebirth. Unlike *ariyan* right view, ‘lower’ right view does not bring one directly to liberation, for it does not concern itself with those elements (such as the four noble truths) which, on being directly seen and understood, are the object of liberating insight. Instead, the treatment of right and wrong view in this sutta suggests that what makes them ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ is the conduct that they encourage. For example, somebody who denies that actions have consequences has no motivation for acting ethically or ‘skillfully’, in a way that will develop in a positive manner the elements that are summarised as the

⁴⁸²M iii 72; Bhikkhu Bodhi 934.

⁴⁸³M i 286; Bhikkhu Bodhi 381.

⁴⁸⁴M i 285; Bhikkhu Bodhi 380.

eightfold path. One who does not believe that there are recluses who have attained spiritual liberation has no incentive either to listen to such individuals' teaching, or to develop their own practice. In the *Sevitabbāsevitabba Sutta*, the Buddha defines wrong view simply as a view that causes "unwholesome states to increase and wholesome states to diminish", and lower right view as that which causes "unwholesome states to decrease, and wholesome states to increase."⁴⁸⁵ It is on these grounds that right views are to be cultivated, and wrong views abandoned.

This relationship between wrong view and wrong conduct is clearly demonstrated in the *Apaṇṇaka Sutta*, where the Buddha explains regarding people who hold the wrong views listed above that:

"...it is to be expected that they will avoid these three wholesome states, namely, good bodily conduct, good verbal conduct, and good mental conduct, and that they will undertake and practise these three unwholesome states, namely bodily . . . verbal . . . and mental misconduct. Why is that? Because those good recluses and brahmins do not see in unwholesome states the danger, degradation, and defilement, nor do they see in wholesome states the blessing of renunciation, the aspect of cleansing."⁴⁸⁶

Here, then, it can be seen that wrong views are judged primarily on pragmatic grounds. They are views which work against the 'causality of liberation' by promoting a negative causal cycle. Let us now consider if views are judged wrongly on their cognitive, as well as their pragmatic, content.

Are views wrong because they are cognitively false?

The *Apaṇṇaka Sutta* is very interesting insofar as it provides a relatively rare example of the Buddha describing views as wrong because they are cognitively false — they do not correspond to reality. Elsewhere, and most prominently in the *Brahmajāla Sutta*, views are rejected as wrong mainly on the grounds of the psychological causal factors that bring them about. In the *Apaṇṇaka Sutta*, the fact that a view is cognitively wrong leads to a whole host of other wrong aspects:

"Since there actually is another world, one who holds the view 'there is no other world' has wrong view. Since there actually is another world, one who intends 'there is no other world' has wrong intention. Since ...one who makes the statement 'there is no other world' has wrong speech. Since ...one who says 'there is no other world' is opposed to those arahants who know the other world. Since ...one who convinces

⁴⁸⁵M iii 52; Bhikkhu Bodhi 919.

⁴⁸⁶M i 402; Bhikkhu Bodhi 507.

another ‘there is no other world’ convinces him to accept an untrue Dhamma; and because he convinces him to accept an untrue Dhamma, he praises himself and disparages others. Thus any previous virtue that he formerly had is abandoned and corrupt conduct is substituted. And this wrong view, wrong intention, wrong speech, opposition to noble ones, convincing another to accept an untrue Dhamma, and self-praise and disparagement of others — these several evil unwholesome states thus come into being with wrong view as their condition.”⁴⁸⁷

Clearly, then, cognitive falsity is a defining element of ‘wrong view’. However, the Buddha’s analysis goes deeper than this — why does it matter if a view is cognitively wrong? It is clear from the passage above that it matters because the wrong view has certain negative causal effects. For example, it places one in opposition to *ariyasāvakas* who have right view, and thus becomes an obstacle to hearing the dhamma and progressing along the path. Similarly, this ignorance is spread if the adherent of the wrong view expounds it to others, which in turn leads to other ‘evil, unwholesome states’. It is thus important to note that the fact that a view is cognitively wrong is not the sole reason why the view is rejected — the only reason why its cognitive falsity matters is that it has consequences detrimental to positive ethical and ‘spiritual’ development.

‘Incentives’ for holding lower right views.

As the Sutta progresses, ‘lower’ right view is advocated in a manner that is very reminiscent of Pascal’s Wager⁴⁸⁸. The Buddha lists five types of wrong view — the nihilistic claim that there is no other world after death; the belief that actions do not have consequences; the view that defilement or purification of beings occurs ‘without cause or condition’; the belief that there are no immaterial realms; and the view that there is no cessation of beings. For each view, there are recluses and brahmins who hold it to be definitely true, and others who definitely oppose it. Let us look at the first example, the view that there is no other world. The Buddha explains how a wise man would behave when faced with the dilemma of choosing between those recluses and brahmins who expound the ‘doctrine’ that there is a world after death, and those who deny it. If there is a world after death, then owing to his good conduct, the wise man would not be reborn in an ‘unhappy destination’. If there was no other world, then at least in this life he would have gained the support and approval of wise teachers. If, on

⁴⁸⁷M i 402; Bhikkhu Bodhi 508.

⁴⁸⁸Blaise Pascal argued that it was rational to believe in God because if one were right, then one would gain God’s approval and if one were wrong, one would not have lost anything by believing in him. If, however, one chose not to believe in God when God did in fact exist, then the outcome would be less favourable. Pascal, *Pensées, Oeuvres Complètes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), p. 450ff.

the other hand, the man were to assume that there was no other world, even if he were right he would gain the censure of the wise in this life, and engage in poor conduct, and if he were wrong: “this person has made an unlucky throw on both counts”⁴⁸⁹, because he would also have an unhappy rebirth after death.

One of the interesting things about this sutta is that the ‘wise man’ who has to decide between different views does not know for himself what is true, but has to take it on trust. The theme of the entire sutta bears this out insofar as it is dedicated to providing a reason for choosing one view (for example, that there is another world) over another (that there is not). The man’s lack of knowledge is explicitly mentioned with reference to the fourth and fifth views, (that there are no immaterial beings, and no cessation of being) — regarding each doctrine and its antithesis, the wise man explains that “that has not been known by me”⁴⁹⁰. Because he has not gained this knowledge personally, the wise man recognises that to hold either view declaring “Only this is true, anything else is wrong” would “not be fitting”⁴⁹¹. Instead he judges which opinion to hold in terms of its likely consequences, on the psychological and ‘ethical’ effects that holding either view might have. In the case of the view that there is no cessation of being, the man recognises that if this were so, he would never cease to be, but may be reborn in one of the immaterial realms. In contrast, if it were true that there is the cessation of being, then it would be possible in theory for him to attain nibbāna. The latter view provides a greater motivation for the practice of dispassion, and it is on these grounds that the wise man follows it:

“The view of those good recluses and brahmins who hold the doctrine and view ‘there definitely is no cessation of being’ is close to lust, close to bondage, close to delighting, close to holding, close to clinging; but the view of those good recluses and brahmins who hold the doctrine and view ‘there definitely is cessation of being’ is close to non-lust, close to non-bondage, close to non-delighting, close to non-holding, close to non-clinging. After reflecting thus, he practises the way to dispassion towards being, to the fading away and cessation of being.”⁴⁹²

In the *Apaṇṇaka Sutta*, then, the motivation for adopting right views is pragmatic — since the ordinary person does not know directly whether one particular view is true, he chooses between different doctrines by weighing up their respective advantages and disadvantages. This is echoed in the *Cūlapuṇṇama Sutta*, where the Buddha explains that an “untrue man” (*asappurisa*) who holds the wrong views listed above will have a bad destiny: “...on the dissolution of the body, after death, [he] reappears in the

⁴⁸⁹M i 403; Bhikkhu Bodhi 509.

⁴⁹⁰M i 410, 411; Bhikkhu Bodhi 516, 7.

⁴⁹¹Ibid.

⁴⁹²M i 517; Bhikkhu Bodhi 517.

destination of untrue men. And what is the destination of untrue men? It is the hell or animal world.”⁴⁹³

Thus in the absence of knowledge of the way things are (transcendent right view), the wise ordinary person will chose to act rightly on pragmatic grounds, by logically weighing up the potential consequences of his actions.

Wrong View and Lower Right View — Summary

So far, then, we have seen a number of grounds on which wrong view is discouraged and ‘lower’ right view advocated.

Wrong views are cognitively wrong, and make a false statement about reality. As we shall see presently, noble disciples know and see reality as it really is (*yathābhūtaṃ*). Therefore one who holds a wrong view sets oneself in opposition to the wise.

Holding wrong views leaves one in a position with more to lose than if one were holding right views. If one is wrong, then not only will one have been at odds with the wise in this life, but will also have an unfavourable rebirth, because wrong view leads to wrong action and a negative kammic cycle. If one holds right views, however, even if views about the next life do not turn out to be well-founded, then at least one will have acted well and gained the approbation of the wise in this life.

View is inextricably linked with other factors such as speech, thought and action. Thus holding wrong view leads to development of all the other factors in their negative aspect, creating a ‘downward spiral’ effect, whereas right view has the opposite, positive effect.

It is clear from the descriptions of ‘lower’ right view we have encountered that it is the province of those who do not know for themselves whether or not a particular view is a true reflection of reality. By the same token, one cannot know whether the ultimate consequences of holding right and wrong views (in relation to a subsequent rebirth) are as the Buddha explains them to be. Instead, this must be taken on trust. This aspect of right view is helpfully described by Collins as a ‘pro-attitude’: “...the belief system of *karma* and *saṃsāra* is ... recommended as a simple religious faith. Holy men can know that it is true, but the ordinary man must take it on trust. The Buddhist term for the appropriate attitude here is *saddhā*, (faith).”⁴⁹⁴ Collins goes on to explain that a more appropriate term than ‘faith’ would be ‘confidence’ — as we will discover presently, the Buddha taught that all the truths he teaches are ultimately

⁴⁹³M iii 22; Bhikkhu Bodhi 893.

⁴⁹⁴Steven Collins, *Selfless Persons*, pp.87-115.

personally verifiable, thus *saddhā* refers to a kind of ‘stop-gap’ confidence that this is the case, and that the path of action the Buddha teaches will ultimately provide the liberating vision attained by the Buddha.

The wrong views that we have considered so far are considered wrong largely because of the negative consequences of holding them. Bhikkhu Bodhi helpfully categorises the wrong views listed in the Nikāyas into three types. The views we have just considered fall into the first category, or “wrong views with fixed consequences” (*niyatamicchādiṭṭhī*). The ‘fixed consequences are the unwholesome types of kamma created by the denial of such factors as the efficacy of effort. Bhikkhu Bodhi explains that the views categorised as ‘wrong views with fixed consequences’:

“undermine the basic principles of morality by denying the framework which gives meaning and validity to external notions.”⁴⁹⁵ The second type are speculative views about metaphysical questions (*diṭṭhigata*) such as whether the world or the self are eternal; and connected to these is the third type of wrong view, the personality view (*sakkāyadiṭṭhi*). Focusing primarily on the *Brahmajāla Sutta*, we will now consider the second kind of wrong view, speculative views about metaphysical questions.

***Brahmajāla Sutta*: Speculative wrong views.**

The *Brahmajāla Sutta* is the first sutta of the first *Nikāya*, the *Dīgha Nikāya*. In the introduction to his translation of the sutta, Bhikkhu Bodhi suggests that its position as the very first sutta is entirely deliberate:

“It is, so to speak, the sentry at the gateway to the Doctrine, whose seal of approval must be obtained in order to cross the border that separates the Buddha’s understanding of reality from all other attempts at a reflective interpretation of man’s existential situation.”⁴⁹⁶

The *Brahmajāla Sutta* contains a list of sixty-two wrong kinds of wrong speculative, metaphysical views. As we will shortly discover, the Buddha does not criticise the actual ‘content’ of these views, but simply describes the causal basis from which they arise to demonstrate that each view is ultimately the product of ignorance and craving. Indeed, at the beginning of the sutta, he speaks out against engaging in arguments and disputes over the content of different views: “Whereas some recluses and brahmins remain addicted to disputation such as:

“You don’t understand this doctrine and discipline — I do! ‘How could *you* understand this doctrine and discipline?’ ‘Your way is all wrong — mine is right!’ ‘I am consistent -you aren’t!’ ‘You said last what you should

⁴⁹⁵Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Sutta on the All-Embracing Net of Views: The Brahmajāla Sutta and its commentarial exegesis* (Kandy, Buddhist Publication Society, 1978), introduction, p.4

⁴⁹⁶Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Sutta on the All-Embracing Net of Views*, p.1.

have said first, and you said first what you should have said last!’ ‘What you took so long to think up has been refuted!’ ‘Your argument has been overthrown, you’re defeated!’ ‘Go on, save your doctrine — get out of that if you can!’, the ascetic Gotama refrains from such disputation.”⁴⁹⁷

The list of wrong views is preceded by three sections on morality, detailing how a monk should conduct himself and the sort of practices he should refrain from, such as fortune telling, gossip and sexual misconduct. We are told that Buddha refrains from all these wrong practices. Thus the first part of the sutta is dedicated to proving the Buddha’s moral integrity and credibility — having established that the Buddha is freed from misconduct and moral taints, his superior knowledge is proclaimed:

“There are, monks, other matters, profound, hard to see, hard to understand, peaceful, excellent, beyond mere thought, subtle, to be experienced by the wise, which the Tathāgatha, having realised them by his own super-knowledge, proclaims, and about which those who would truthfully praise the Tathāgatha would rightly speak.”⁴⁹⁸

The sutta thus prepares the reader (or, as it would originally have been, the hearer) for the discourse on views by engendering faith or confidence in its teacher, the Buddha, by proclaiming his superior knowledge and conduct.

The list of wrong views is divided into two categories: the first consists of eighteen speculative views about the past and the second of forty-four speculative views about the future. Of the first category, the initial four views are described as ‘eternalist doctrines’ (*sassataṇḍā*), for in each it is claimed that the world and the self are eternal. The first three of these views are based on meditative experiences — when a ‘certain recluse or brahmin’ recalls (in varying degrees) his previous existences he concludes from this that his self and the world which it inhabits has always existed. The fourth eternalist view is based on ‘logic’, rather than meditative experience — the recluse comes to the view that world and self are eternal by “hammering it out by reason, following his own line of thought”⁴⁹⁹ This description of eternalist views is followed by a passage that appears each time a set of different wrong views has been expounded:

“This, monks, the Tathāgatha understands: These viewpoints thus grasped and adhered to will lead to such-and-such destinations in another world. This the Tathāgatha knows, and more, but he is not attached to that knowledge. And being thus unattached he has experienced for himself perfect peace, and having truly understood the arising and passing away of

⁴⁹⁷D i 9; Walshe 71.

⁴⁹⁸D i 12; Walshe 73.

⁴⁹⁹D i 16; Walshe 74.

feelings, their attraction and peril and the deliverance from them, the Tathāgatha is liberated without remainder.”⁵⁰⁰

It is interesting that here again the viewpoints are judged on the grounds of their consequences (for example, that they lead to further rebirth), rather than their content. Were the Buddha to dispute the claims put forward, then he would be engaging in the ‘disputation’ to which some recluses and brahmins are addicted. Instead he remains ‘unattached’ to the knowledge that he has gained. What this ‘unattachment’ means will become clearer presently when we consider the role of craving and the self-view, (*sakāyadiṭṭhi*) in relation to view.

The second set of four wrong views belongs to recluses and brahmins who are ‘partly Eternalists and partly Non-Eternalists’ (*ekaccasassatavāda*). Just like the eternalist set of views, there are three views which are grounded in experience — in this case, the experience of beings who have existed in higher, deva realms and can recall these existences — and one view that is the product of reasoning and logic. The first of the ‘partial-eternalist’ views is worth considering in some detail, not only as an example of how experience can be interpreted erroneously, but also because it provides an account of how theism arose. According to Buddhist cosmology, the universe and the world-systems within it are constantly “evolving and dissolving in patterns governed by impersonal law”⁵⁰¹. As a result of this the world where Brahmās live contracts and when it expands again, a being is born there as a result of his previous kamma. He exists there alone for a very long time and, becoming lonely, wishes that other beings would arrive there. Coincidentally, just as he thinks this, other beings are reborn there, having exhausted their lifespan in a previous realm. The first being, however, thinks that the others have arisen as a result of his wishes, and believes that “I am the Brahmā, the Great Brahmā, the Conquerer, the Unconquered, the All-Seeing, the All-Powerful, the Lord, the Maker and Creator, Ruler, Appointer and Orderer, Father of All That Have Been and Shall Be. These beings were created by me...”⁵⁰². Similarly, the other beings think that they have been created by the original being, because he was there before them. Having explained this, the Buddha describes how one of the beings in this realm might subsequently be reborn in a human realm, and through his meditation may recall his existence in the Brahmā realm, but nothing preceding that, and so thinks: “That Brahmā, ...he made us, and he is permanent, stable, eternal, not subject to change, the same for ever and ever. But we who were created by that Brahmā, we are impermanent, unstable, short-lived, fated to fall away, and we have come to this world.”⁵⁰³. This ‘theistic’ belief is thus partly eternalist, for

⁵⁰⁰D i 16-17; Walshe 75.

⁵⁰¹Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Sutta on the All-Embracing Net of Views*, p.12

⁵⁰²D i 18; Walshe 76.

⁵⁰³D i 18-19; Walshe 76.

it maintains that there is an eternal deity, and partly non-eternalist for it recognises that ‘lesser’ beings pass away.

The next set of four views are described as views of finitude and infinitude — with recourse to meditative experience and reason, recluses and brahmins claim either that the world is infinite or finite (depending on how it has appeared in their experiences during meditation). Similarly, one of the two types of ‘chance originationist’ views (*adhiccasamuppannavāda*) are based upon meditation experience. For example, in the first chance-originationist view listed, a deva in the Unconscious sphere attains a conscious perception and falls from that realm into the human realm. Because, owing to his unconsciousness in the previous existence, he is unable to recall past lives in his meditation experiences, and thus supposes: “‘The self and the world have arisen by chance. How so? Before this I did not exist. Now from not-being I have been brought to being.’”⁵⁰⁴ The second type of chance-originationist view is based on reason.

Thus ten of the first eighteen types of speculation on the past are based on meditative experience, and four of them on reason and logic.

The Views of the ‘Eel-Wrigglers’.

The four views not yet mentioned follow a different format and are of particular interest because in their content (or rather, lack of content) they are not dissimilar to the Buddha’s own ‘views’. These are the four views of the ‘Endless Equivocators’ or ‘Eel-wrigglers’ (*amarā-vikheppikā*) so called because in order to avoid committing themselves to a particular view they are constantly evasive, like wriggling eels. Their motivation for not committing themselves is that they fear the consequences of being mistaken. The first form of ‘eel-wriggler’ does not know whether something is good or bad, and fears that if he were to make a claim either way he might be lying, and this would be a hindrance to him:

“Thus fearing to lie, abhorring to lie, he does not declare a thing to be good or bad, but when asked about this or that matter, he resorts to evasive statements and wriggles like an eel: ‘I don’t say that. I don’t say it is otherwise. I don’t say that it is not. I don’t not say it is not.’”⁵⁰⁵

The second sort of Eel-wriggler makes evasive statements because he, too, does not know whether a thing is good or bad, but instead of fearing lies, he fears experiencing ‘lust, hatred or aversion’, and the concomitant distress would be a hindrance to him. Thus: “fearing attachment, abhorring attachment, he resorts to evasive statements.”⁵⁰⁶

⁵⁰⁴D i 29; Walshe 82.

⁵⁰⁵D i 26; Walshe 80.

⁵⁰⁶Ibid.

The third sort will not commit himself to a view because he is worried that he may be humiliated and distressed when cross-examined by “ascetics and Brahmins who are wise, skilful, practised debaters, like archers who can split hairs, who go around destroying others’ views with their wisdom . . .”⁵⁰⁷ The final characterisation of an eel-wiggler concerns a man who is simply stupid, and resorts to evasive answers when questioned “because of his dullness and stupidity”⁵⁰⁸

What is particularly interesting about the eel-wrigglers, especially the first three types, is that their motivation for *not* holding a view is on the grounds of the psychological and spiritual consequences of adhering to a wrong view. We have already seen that it is the effects of holding certain views that determines their ‘rightness’ or ‘wrongness’ as much as their cognitive accuracy. Similarly, the questions that the fourth type of eel-wiggler refuses to answer and evades are the same questions that the Buddha refuses to answer in the *Cūḷamālukya-sutta*⁵⁰⁹ (albeit with a very different motivation). One might therefore expect that the Buddha would treat the eel-wrigglers with more approval than the exponents of the other false views so far listed, but this is not the case. This is because the views of the eel-wrigglers, even if they are cognitively accurate, are nevertheless grounded in ignorance and craving. For example, the individual who does not want to commit himself to a view because he fears telling falsehoods is motivated by a certain level of attachment. He has certain consequences that he wishes to avoid, and certain fears and expectations that underpin his views. His views are therefore not a pure perception of the way things truly are, but the manifestation of certain forms of craving and clinging. This point will become clearer in the forthcoming discussion of how the Buddha understands the arising of views. The remaining forty-four views in the sutta are views about the future. The first set consists of sixteen different ways of asserting the conscious post-mortem survival of the self (for example, as material, immaterial, both or neither; as finite, infinite, both or neither; of limited perception, of unlimited perception, and so on.). The next eight views all claim a doctrine of unconscious post-mortem survival, and a further eight claim neither-conscious-nor-unconscious post-mortem survival. Having thus listed comprehensively the different forms in which post-mortem survival of the self can be maintained, the Buddha moves on to a list of annihilationist claims, in which the self undergoes some form of destruction or annihilation after death. There are seven views in this category, ranging from materialism, to the view that the self is only partially annihilated, with another, ‘divine’ self that remains after death.⁵¹⁰ The last five views listed in the *Brahmajāla Sutta*

⁵⁰⁷Ibid.

⁵⁰⁸D i 27; Walshe 81.

⁵⁰⁹M ii 427; Bhikkhu Bodhi 533.

⁵¹⁰D i 34 ff; Walshe 84-5.

concern the claim that ‘the self realises the highest nibbāna here and now’⁵¹¹ The first view consists of the belief that when the self, “being furnished and endowed with the fivefold sense-pleasures, indulges in them. . .”⁵¹², it realises nibbāna. The remaining four views maintain that the self attains nibbāna during the four stages of meditative absorption (*jhāna*) respectively.

The Arising of Views.

Having listed all these views, the Buddha explains how they are a comprehensive list of all the different speculations that can be made: “These are the sixty-two ways in which those ascetics and Brahmins who are speculators about the past, the future, or both, put forward views about these. There is no other way.”⁵¹³ He then repeats that he knows all these views lead to destinations in another world, but that he is not attached to this knowledge. The crux of the sutta occurs when, having summarised each set of views, the Buddha explains that they are all manifestations of fundamental ignorance and craving:

“When those ascetics and brahmins who are speculators about the past, the future, or both, having fixed views, put forward views in sixty-two different ways, that is merely the feeling of those who do not know and see, the worry and vacillation of those immersed in craving.”⁵¹⁴

Each set of views is listed again, and regarding each view it is explained that “that is conditioned by contact”⁵¹⁵, and this contact conditions all the feelings that prompt these views. This reference to contact and feeling leads to a demonstration of how views arise out of the cycle of dependent origination — all the speculators “experience these feelings by repeated contact through the six sense bases, feeling conditions craving; craving conditions clinging; clinging conditions becoming; becoming conditions birth; birth conditions ageing and death, sorrow, lamentation, sadness and distress.”⁵¹⁶ Just as all these views are a product of dependent origination, so when a monk comprehends dependent origination, he no longer adheres to such views: “When a monk understands as they really are the arising and passing away of the six bases of contact, their attraction and peril, and the deliverance from them, he knows that which goes beyond all these views”⁵¹⁷

Speculative views, then, are a further manifestation of the cycle of craving and

⁵¹¹D i 36; Walshe 85.

⁵¹²Ibid.

⁵¹³D i 38; Walshe 86.

⁵¹⁴D i 40; Walshe 88.

⁵¹⁵D i 42 ff; Walshe 88-9.

⁵¹⁶D i 45; Walshe 89.

⁵¹⁷Ibid.

ignorance that propagates suffering and saṃsāric existence, and it is on this basis that they are criticised. In the introduction to his translation of the *Brahmajāla Sutta*, Bhikkhu Bodhi points out that the sutta:

“does not actually provide specific criticisms of the doctrinal positions it describes, nor does it even attempt to refute the general principles governing each class of views ...the sutta rests content simply to explain each standpoint and to show the causal situation out of which it arises.”⁵¹⁸

He then suggests the reasoning behind this approach:

“Since speculative views thus tie in with the net of phenomena embraced by the truth of suffering, the proper way to treat them is the same as that appropriate for the more general malady: to seek out their underlying causes and apply the remedy suitable for eliminating these causes.”⁵¹⁹

Collins, too, finds one of the most significant points about the *Brahmajāla Sutta* is that it judges views entirely on the grounds that they are conditioned:

“the views of all others ...are conditioned products of their own experience, which is explained by the teaching of dependent origination. Each view is merely something experienced by those recluses and brahmins ‘who neither know nor see, and are subject to craving.’ All of these thinkers have their experience as a result of sense-conduct in (any or all of) the six senses.”⁵²⁰

To sum up, then, speculative views are ultimately a product of ignorance, of a fundamental misapprehension that characterises the perception of the ordinary person. The ordinary person erroneously perceives the world in terms of the self; let us now look at how this perception relates to speculative views.

Speculative Views and the Self-View.

The message that views are a product of a fundamental ignorance is strongly reinforced in many other suttas — we will now survey some of the accounts of how views arise. Of particular importance is the relation of the self-view (*sakkāyadiṭṭhi*) to the arising of view. The self-view describes the mind’s tendency to identify with one or all of the five elements that, according to the Buddha, constitute the human being. These are the five *khandhas* of body, feeling, perception, mental activities and consciousness. All five *khandhas* are impermanent, not-self and subject to suffering, but the ordinary person fails to recognise this fact and clings to these elements as though they were a self.

⁵¹⁸Bhikkhu Bodhi, *Sutta on the All-Embracing Net of Views*, p.8.

⁵¹⁹Bhikkhu Bodhi, *Sutta on the All-Embracing Net of Views*, p.11.

⁵²⁰Collins, *Selfless Persons*, p.128. For a Nikāya reference to this, see S iv 88; Woodward 54

“The clinging to being issues in a ‘personality view’ (*sakkāyadiṭṭhi*) affirming the presence of an abiding self in the psychophysical organism in one of twenty ways as either identical with, possessing, contained within, or containing one or other of the five aggregates that constitute the individual personality ... Arisen already at a pre-reflective level, this view in turn becomes the basis for later reflective interpretations of existence, crystallising into the sixty-two views of the [*Brahmajāla*] Sutta.”⁵²¹

It is interesting to note that the self-view is not simply an opinion or belief, but is the ‘template’ with which we order our existence. The connection between the self-view and the *Brahmajāla Sutta* is made explicitly by the Buddha in the *Samyutta Nikāya*. “...it is owing to the personality-view that they arise, and if the personality-view exists not, they do not exist.”⁵²² This process is explained in detail in the *Khandhavagga* the Buddha describes firstly how recluses and brahmins understand the self as being in or identified with the five khandhas, resulting in the view “I am”. As a result of this view “I am”, “there comes to pass a descent of the five feeling-faculties of seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting and touching.”⁵²³ This reinforces Bhikkhu Bodhi’s above point that the self view exists at a ‘pre-reflective’ level, shaping how we receive and interpret our experience. As a result of the feeling faculties, mind and mind-states are the result, accompanied by the ‘ignorance element’ (*dhammā avijjīdhātu*). Once feelings make contact with this base of ignorance, views arise at the reflective, speculative level:

“Touched by the feeling born of contact with ignorance, there comes to the untaught manyfolk (the view) ‘I am’; there comes (the view) ‘this same I am’; there comes (the view) ‘things will be’ ... ‘things will not be’, ... ‘things will have body’ ... ‘things will be bodyless’ ... ‘things will be unconscious’ ... ‘things will be neither conscious nor unconscious’.”⁵²⁴

The fact that views are a symptom of ignorance is reinforced when it is explained that the noble disciple is free of all views because he is freed from ignorance: “for the well-taught ariyan disciple ignorance is put away and knowledge arises. Along with the fading away of ignorance and the arising of knowledge there comes to him no view that ‘I am’ ... ‘this same I am’ ...”⁵²⁵

The notion that a ‘pre-reflective’ self-view is a basis for all other views is demonstrated in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* where the Buddha explains that there are

⁵²¹Collins, *Selfless Persons*, p.7. The *Khandhavagga* (S iii 1-240; Woodward 1-154) is devoted to describing *sakkāyadiṭṭhi*, and its antidote, *anattā* (not self).

⁵²²S iv 286; adapted from Woodward 194.

⁵²³S iii 48; Woodward 40.

⁵²⁴Ibid.

⁵²⁵Ibid.

‘six standpoints for views’. The first five of these involve regarding each of the five khandhas thus: “This is mine, this I am, this is my self.”⁵²⁶ The sixth standpoint for views is the self-view itself which arises dependent on the identification with the five khandhas: “And this standpoint for views, namely, ‘This is self, this is self, this is the world; after death I shall be permanent, everlasting, eternal, not subject to change, I shall endure as long as eternity’ — this too he regards as ‘This is mine, this am I, this is my self.’”⁵²⁷ Conversely, the noble disciple regards each of the six standpoints for views as “‘This is not mine, this I am not, this is not my self.’”, and is thus not subject to the anxieties that these standpoints can bring: “Since he regards them thus, he is not agitated about what is non-existent.”⁵²⁸ As the Sutta progresses, the Buddha explains that *any* view of self is bound to bring suffering with it:

“‘Bhikkhus, you may well cling to that doctrine of self that would not arouse sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair in one who clings to it. But do you see any such doctrine of self, bhikkhus?’ — ‘No, venerable sir.’ — ‘Good, bhikkhus. I too do not see any doctrine of self that would not arouse sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair in one who clings to it.’”⁵²⁹

On several occasions in the *Majjhima Nikāya*, the Buddha gives an account of the arising of view — although these references have less emphasis on the self-view — they nevertheless concentrate on the causal psychological factors that result in views. The process by which contact with the senses conditions views is elaborated in the *Madhupiṇḍika Sutta*. The Buddha explains that when the eye, for example, meets a form, ‘eye-consciousness’ arises — the meeting of all three is contact. Feeling arises as a result of conduct;

“What one feels, that one perceives. What one perceives, that one thinks about. What one thinks about, that one mentally proliferates. With what one has mentally proliferated as the source, perceptions and notions tinged with mental proliferation beset a man with respect to past, future, and present forms cognizable through the eye.”⁵³⁰

Whether or not one attaches and grasps at these mental proliferations is the determinant not only for views, but also for many other negative factors that lead to suffering:

“Bhikkhus, as to the source through which perceptions and notions tinged by mental proliferation beset a man: if nothing is found there to delight in,

⁵²⁶M i 135; Bhikkhu Bodhi 229.

⁵²⁷Ibid.

⁵²⁸M i 136; Bhikkhu Bodhi 230.

⁵²⁹M i 137; Bhikkhu Bodhi 231.

⁵³⁰M i 111-2; Bhikkhu Bodhi 203.

welcome and hold to, this is the end of the underlying tendency to lust, to aversion, to views, to doubt, to conceit, to the desire for being, to ignorance, this is the end of resorting to rods and weapons, of quarrels, brawls, disputes, recrimination, malice, false speech; here these evil unwholesome states cease without remainder.”⁵³¹

Here, then, it is the ‘delighting in’ and ‘holding to’ mental proliferations that is at the root of views. Although there is no mention of the self-view in this sutta, it can be understood as a form of such ‘delighting in’ and ‘holding to.’ What distinguishes the noble disciple from the ordinary person, then, is that he does not grasp after the five aggregates or mental proliferations, and does not therefore hold or attach to speculative views. The views of the “eel-wrigglers” in the *Brahmajāla Sutta* can be understood in this way — what makes them wrong views is not so much the content of the views themselves, but the fact that they arise out of craving and ignorance.

So far, then, we have seen how the Buddha rejects speculative views on the grounds that they are symptoms of a fundamental ignorance that leads to suffering (*dukkha*). The Buddha claims that he teaches the Dhamma in order to bring beings to the cessation of suffering: “Both formerly and now what I teach is suffering and the cessation of suffering.”⁵³² We have seen that all speculative views are rooted in the self-view and that all versions of the self-view cause suffering. Thus the Buddha’s analysis and ‘deconstruction’ of speculative views in terms of their causal factors is all part of his diagnosis of and treatment for suffering.

In the *Pāsādika Sutta*, the Buddha mentions various speculations about the future, the past, and whether or not the world and the self are eternal, whether or not the world is created by chance and so on. The Buddha explains that when he meets ascetics and brahmins who hold such views, he does not “admit their claims”. He offers the following justification for this:

“Because ... different beings hold different opinions on such matters. Nor do I consider such theories equal to my own, still less superior. I am their superior in regard to the higher exposition. As for those bases of speculation about the beginning of things which I have explained to you as they should be explained, why should I now explain them to you as they should not be explained.”⁵³³

The message here seems to be that the Buddha is ‘above’ speculating on such questions which are ultimately grounded in ignorance. The ‘bases of speculation’ that he has already explained is a reference to the *Brahmajāla Sutta*. The ‘higher

⁵³¹M i 109-110; Bhikkhu Bodhi 202.

⁵³²M i 140; Bhikkhu Bodhi 234.

⁵³³D iii 140; Walshe 438.

exposition' that the Buddha does engage in is of a different order to these speculations, and this is the grounds for his superiority. Indeed, the Buddha's teachings, his 'higher exposition', is designed to free his disciples from the ignorance of which speculative views are a speculation: "For the destruction of all such views about the past and the future, for transcending them, I have taught and laid down the four foundations of mindfulness."⁵³⁴

The Unanswered Questions: Why are certain speculative questions left without an answer?

The Buddha's teaching of the 'unanswered questions', in which he refuses to offer his own views on certain speculative metaphysical issues, provides more clues as to the Buddha's attitude towards views. The questions are most clearly demonstrated in the *Cūḷamālukya-sutta*⁵³⁵. In this sutta, the monk Mālunkya wishes to know the Buddha's opinion on ten 'metaphysical' questions, namely: Is the world eternal? Is it not eternal? Is the world finite? Is it infinite? Is the soul the same as the body? Is the soul one thing and the body another? Does the Tathāgatha exist after death? Does the Tathāgatha not exist after death? Does the Tathāgatha both exist and not exist after death? Does the Tathāgatha neither exist nor not exist after death?⁵³⁶ Mālunkya knows that the Buddha has already 'set aside and rejected' these questions as speculative views (*diṭṭhigata*), but he is unwilling to accept this and determines that "If the Blessed One does not declare these to me, then I will abandon the training and return to the low life."⁵³⁷ The Buddha responds to Mālunkya with an analogy in which a man is dangerously wounded with a poisoned arrow. When a surgeon arrives, the man refuses to let him remove the arrow until he knows who fired it, what he looked like and where he came from, and what exactly every element of the arrow was made of. As a result, the man dies without ever finding out the answers to his questions. So Mālunkya is like the man struck with the arrow — the questions he asks will still remain 'undeclared' by the Buddha and he will die.

The meaning of the unanswered questions teaching has been the subject of much scholarly debate, and it has been interpreted in various different ways. It is

⁵³⁴D iii 141; Walshe 438.

⁵³⁵M i 426-432; Bhikkhu Bodhi 533-536. The ten unanswered questions are also found in the *Aggivachagotta Sutta*, M i 484-489; Bhikkhu Bodhi 590-594, and the *Paṭṭhapāda Sutta*, D i 178-203; Walshe 159-170.

⁵³⁶M i 426; Bhikkhu Bodhi 533.

⁵³⁷M i 427; Bhikkhu Bodhi 533.

worth briefly examining this debate, for not only does the teaching of the unanswered questions help to elucidate the Buddha's attitude towards certain views, but, as we have seen, Hick uses the notion of the unanswered questions to support his pluralist hypothesis.

Was the Buddha an agnostic?

In justifying his refusal to provide answers to the ten questions, the Buddha explains that such questions are irrelevant to the path to liberation:

“Living the life of purity does not depend on the view that the world is eternal, nor does it depend on the view that the world is not eternal. Whether or not the world is eternal or not eternal, there definitely is birth, growing old, dying, grief, sorrow, suffering, lamentation and despair. And I have explained how to bring those things to an end here and now.”⁵³⁸

Some scholars have taken this refusal to answer as a sign of the Buddha's agnosticism about metaphysical questions — they are unanswered because they are unanswerable and neither the Buddha nor anybody else could know the answer. An example of such a view is provided by David Kalupahana, who argues that the Buddha remained silent on this issue because the questions are not answerable with reference to sense experience, and knowledge based on sense experience is the only possible knowledge:

“Since no answer based on experience is possible, the Buddha remained silent when pressed for an answer and maintained that the questions as to whether the *tathāgata* exists (*hoti*) or arises (*uppajjati*), does not exist or does not arise, both or neither, do not fit the case (*na upeti*)”⁵³⁹

Hayes summarises Kalupahana's objections to ‘metaphysical knowledge’ as follows:

“(1) Metaphysical theories have no basis in our ordinary experience, and they cannot be verified by empirical investigation. (2) Metaphysicians attempt to determine in advance what must be true and ignore what their senses tell them. (3) Metaphysical propositions are strings of words that may appear meaningful because they conform to the rules of grammar, but turn out to be meaningless when examined more closely.”⁵⁴⁰

Another ‘agnostic’ argument that Hayes identifies is that put forward by T.R.V. Murti. Murti argues that the Buddha left the questions unanswered because

⁵³⁸M i 431 trans Richard Hayes in “Nāgārjuna's Appeal” in *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 22, 1994, pp. 299-378.

⁵³⁹David Kalupahana, *Causality: the Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (Honolulu, University Press of Hawaii, 1976), p. 157 in Hayes, “Nāgārjuna's Appeal”, p. 358.

⁵⁴⁰Hayes, “Nāgārjuna's Appeal”, p. 358.

they dealt with the realm of the absolute, and the absolute is not capable of being characterised by Reason: “the questions are about the Unconditioned. Buddha is alive ...to the insuperable difficulties in conceiving the transcendent in terms of the empirical ...The Tathāgata, as the totality of things, is beyond predication.”⁵⁴¹

Murti's explanation is in some ways similar to Hick's interpretation of the unanswered questions, for Hick suggests that one reason why the questions are left unanswered is that the Buddha recognises that they are attempting to describe the indescribable, namely the Real *an sich*.⁵⁴² Hayes, however, rejects both Kalupahana and Murti's explanations, arguing that both have “gratuitously offered an anachronistic interpretation of the Buddha's silence.”⁵⁴³ He sees these interpretations as ‘gratuitous’ because the Buddha's own explanation is present in the Nikāya texts and provide sufficient justification for his silence.

Not conducive to the path to liberation.

The main justification that Hayes points to in the *Cūḷamālunkyasutta* is the Buddha's claim that worrying about the ten unanswered questions is not conducive to the fulfilment of the holy life that the Buddha sets forth.

Just as the wounded man knowing the details of who fired the arrow would not alter the fact that he is dangerously wounded by it, so irrespective of which speculative view one holds, there is suffering. Thus the answers to questions about speculative views are fundamentally irrelevant, impotent in dealing with the pressing and immediate problem of *dukkha*. The Buddha has left each of Mālunkya's questions unanswered because: “it is unbeneficial, it does not belong to the fundamentals of the holy life, it does not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to peace, to direct knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbāna. That is why I have left it undeclared. (*abyākatam*)”⁵⁴⁴ Instead the Buddha declares the four truths, because they *do* lead to liberation.

The same message is found in the *Poṭṭhapāda Sutta*, where the eponymous wanderer asks the Buddha the same ten questions, along with other questions about whether or not the self is identical with perception. The Buddha's response is exactly the same — such questions are not conducive to the holy life and instead one should consider the four noble truths:

⁵⁴¹T. R. V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (London, George Allen and Unwin, 1960) cited by Hayes, “Nāgārjuna's Appeal”, p. 358.

⁵⁴²Indeed, in *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 291-2. Hick cites with approval Murti's claim that the ‘Absolute’ is transcendent.

⁵⁴³Hayes, “Nāgārjuna's Appeal”, p. 359.

⁵⁴⁴*Ibid.*

“Why has the Lord not declared these things?’ ‘Potṭhapāda, that is not conducive to the purpose, not conducive to Dhamma, not the way to embark on the holy life; it does not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion, to cessation, to calm, to higher knowledge, to enlightenment, to nibbāna. That is why I have not declared it.’

‘But, Lord, what has the Lord declared?’ ‘Potṭhapāda, I have declared: “This is suffering, this is the origin of suffering, this is the cessation of suffering, and this is the path leading to the cessation of suffering.”’⁵⁴⁵

In the *Aggivacchagottasutta*, when the same ten questions are asked of the Buddha by Vacchagotta, he replies that he does not hold such views because each view “is a thicket of views, a wilderness of views, a fetter of views. It is beset by suffering, by vexation, by despair, and by fever, and it does not lead to disenchantment, to dispassion ...”⁵⁴⁶

Clearly, then, the point of the questions’ irrelevance to liberation is one important factor in the Buddha’s reasoning. But why are the questions irrelevant? An explanation for this is also found in the Nikāyas, and, indeed, Collins argues that this provides the ‘most important reason’ for not answering the questions.⁵⁴⁷

The questions are incoherent.

The reason the Buddha gives for not answering the questions is that they make incoherent assumptions. That is to say, the questions themselves do not make sense on an ultimate level, for reality ‘as it is’ does not conform to the presuppositions in the questions. As Collins puts it, the questions are “linguistically ill-formed”. We have already seen that the Buddha denied the existence of an enduring self; the problem with the unanswered questions, particularly the last six, is that they implicitly assume the existence of the self:

“for Buddhism there is no real referent for these terms, such as Tathāgatha, ‘self’, ‘being’ and so on. What appears as an individual, through the combination of a single body and the conceit ‘I am’, is the phenomenal person (*puggala*), the personality (*sakkāya* or *attabhāva*): in fact all phenomena, both material and immaterial, ‘form’, and ‘name’, are composites made out of impersonal elements.”⁵⁴⁸

⁵⁴⁵D i 187ff; Walshe 164.

⁵⁴⁶M i 485; Bhikkhu Bodhi 591.

⁵⁴⁷Collins, *Selfless Persons*, p.133.

⁵⁴⁸Collins, *Selfless Persons*, p.132.

This point is illustrated in the *Aggivacchagottasutta*. When Vacchagotta asks the Buddha “‘When a bhikkhu’s mind is liberated, where does he reappear [after death]?’” the Buddha rejects this question because the terms in which it is couched do not make sense — it would not make sense to say the mind ‘reappears’ or ‘does not reappear’; nor could one say that it neither reappears nor does not reappear, or both reappears and does not reappear. When Vacchagotta expresses his ‘bewilderment’ at this response, the Buddha elucidates the concept with an analogy. He explains that it is as if a fire were extinguished, and somebody were to ask whether the fire went to the east, west, north or south when it went out. Just as this question is not appropriate, and does not apply, so is Vacchagotta’s original question is inappropriate. Again, this demonstrates that the unenlightened mind is fundamentally ignorant, and does not cognise the world in the same way as a being who is liberated. It is a mistaken belief in the self-view that lies at the root of such mistaken speculations. Sariputta explains that: “... when Personality Belief exists, these views [on the Unanswered Questions and the views of the *Brahmajāla Sutta*] exist; when it does not, these views do not.”⁵⁴⁹ On one occasion in the Saṃyutta Nikāya, the Buddha explains why it is that wanderers of other views make speculations about the ten unanswered:

“Let me ask you what is the reason why the wandering ascetics with other views try to answer these questions, whereas Gotama the recluse does not try to answer them. The reason is that other wandering ascetics think of the eye, ear, nose, tongue, body or mind as belonging to him, nor does he think of them ‘These are my self.’ The Tathāgata, unlike other wandering ascetics, also does not regard feelings, perception, mentality or awareness as things that belong to him or as being himself or as being part of himself. There is nothing about which the Tathāgata says ‘This is mine. This is I. This is my self.’”⁵⁵⁰

Collins explains that the Nikāyas consistently present those who do ask such questions as conditioned by attachment to the self-view, to the conceit ‘I am’. An *ariyasāvaka*, however, is not attached to this sense of self, and thus does not participate in these mistaken speculations: “while the ordinary man does not understand the rise and fall of such views, as conditioned phenomena, the wise man does, and so ‘is not perturbed, nor has any doubt’ concerning the Unanswered Questions.”⁵⁵¹

Collins cites a passage from the *Mahānidāna Sutta* in which the Buddha refutes the charge of agnosticism; through his insight of the way things are, the Tathāgata

⁵⁴⁹S iv 287; adapted from Woodward 194.

⁵⁵⁰S iv 391, trans. Hayes. “Nāgārjuna’s Appeal”.

⁵⁵¹Collins, *Selfless Persons*, p.135.

knows what there is to be known. This suggests that it is not through ignorance that the Buddha does not answer the unanswered questions. On the contrary, it is through his very knowledge and insight that he knows that the question does not make sense, and therefore cannot be answered in any ultimately meaningful sense:

“whatever verbal designation or means of verbal designation there is, whatever expression or means thereof, whatever description or means thereof, whatever knowledge or realm of knowledge, whatever rebirth or experience of rebirth — by knowing these with superknowledge the monk is freed. But it is not fitting to have the view that ‘the freed monk does not know or see.’”⁵⁵²

Collins provides a further example of this point in which the monk Ānanda is accused of not ‘knowing and seeing’. Ānanda replies that he does know and see, and knows that having an opinion on the unanswered questions is “a prejudice [*ditthigatani*]; whatever prejudice there is, whatever fixing on a view, insisting on it, being obsessed by it, whatever the origin and cessation of view — all this I know and see.”⁵⁵³ It is precisely through knowledge, then, rather than ignorance, that the unanswered questions are not answered.

Collins does acknowledge that another important reason why the Buddha rejects the ten questions is that they are irrelevant to the path to salvation. However, he sees this as a subsidiary reason, which must be seen in context. For example, in the *Cūḷamālunkyaśutta*, the Buddha is approached by the monk Mālunkya whose meditation practice is hindered by his ‘reasonings of mind’ about the ten questions; indeed, he is even threatening to give up his life as a monk. The Buddha uses the analogy of the man pierced with an arrow to illustrate to Mālunkya the foolishness of his stance. It is to this particular situation that the Buddha’s use of the analogy is directed, a point that is stressed by Collins:

“Within the narrative, this analogy, and the Buddha’s insistence that the religious life does not depend on an answer to such questions, are clearly intended to provide — by contrast — a model for monks to evaluate the relative importance of practical religious training and sophisticated conceptual analysis. It does not mean that such an analysis is not possible, nor that Buddhism as a whole rejects all speculation because it is harmful to the attempt to salvation. What is rejected is harmful speculation based on mistaken premises.”⁵⁵⁴

⁵⁵²D ii 68, trans. Collins, *Selfless Persons*, p.134.

⁵⁵³A v 196-8 trans. Collins, *Selfless Persons*, p.134.

⁵⁵⁴Collins, *Selfless Persons*, p 137. Collins also cites Rahula, 1967 pp.62-3 on S iv 400-1

The *Poṭṭhapāda Sutta* is a similar case; in it, the Buddha tells Poṭṭhapāda that it will be difficult for him to follow the path as long as he holds onto his desire to know about the fate of the self and the body after death, or the nature of perception and so on. It will be difficult because such presuppositions are “not conducive to the purpose, not conducive to Dhamma, not the way to embark upon the holy life”⁵⁵⁵. Here, the Buddha is applying his teaching to a particular individual and a certain set of views — it would be unwise to infer from this that the Buddha has this attitude to all speculative views: “Again, this is not a universal recommendation to an ‘empiricism’ or practical, anti-metaphysical agnosticism, but a piece of advice given to an enthusiastic but easily misled admirer.”⁵⁵⁶

Collins goes on to argue that in nearly every other case in which the Buddha refuses to answer such metaphysical questions for a practical reason, “it is possible to see an explicit connection with the facts of training.” Thus whilst it is true that the irrelevance of speculative views to the practice of the path is one of the reasons why they are rejected, “this is a subsidiary aspect, dependent on the linguistic analysis which shows them to be ill-formed, and to contain presuppositions which do not allow a direct answer.”⁵⁵⁷

In the light of these arguments, Collins argues that the status of the unanswered questions is clear. Conceptually, they depend upon mistaken assumptions about the existence of referents which do not, in fact, exist. Psychologically, “the fact of making such an assumption, and therefore asking the questions, is a conditioned result of ignorance and craving.”⁵⁵⁸ Whilst their irrelevance to the path is also an important factor in their rejection, it is secondary to the main reasons above. Collins suggests that the questions have been so often misinterpreted because ‘referring’ terms such as ‘self’ continue to be used in our language, indeed no language exists which does not use a subject-predicate structure. Similarly, the Buddha’s teachings were designed to be accessible to *puthujjanas*, who are still locked in ignorance and see and understand the world through the distorting ‘template’ of the self-view: “Buddhist teaching is intended to be of use to the ‘ordinary’ unenlightened man, who must by definition think in terms of ‘selves’ and ‘I’, and by whom ordinary language is taken at face value.”⁵⁵⁹

So far, then, we have seen two reasons why the Buddha ‘sets aside’ speculative views. Firstly, they are a product of craving and ignorance, part of the causal cycle that propagates suffering. Secondly they are at best irrelevant, and at worst a hindrance to the process of development from ordinary person to noble disciple: as a symptom of

⁵⁵⁵D i 189; Walshe 164.

⁵⁵⁶Collins, *Selfless Persons*, p.137.

⁵⁵⁷Collins, *Selfless Persons*, p.138.

⁵⁵⁸Collins, *Selfless Persons*, p.135.

⁵⁵⁹*Ibid.*

the cycle of *dukkha* that the Buddha's teaching purports to end, they are not helpful in the process of liberation.

Views Wrong Because They are a Source of Dispute.

Now we will consider a further objection that the Buddha has with speculative views, namely that they become the source for disputes and attachments. We have seen how, in the *Madhupiṇḍika Sutta*, the clinging after mental proliferations that precedes the formation of views leads to “the end of resorting to rods and weapons, of quarrels, brawls, disputes, recrimination, malice, false speech”.⁵⁶⁰ This suggests that views are the one of the underlying causes of conflict and disputes.

It is not simply the ‘irrelevant’ speculative views that the Buddha warns his disciples against — even the Dhamma can be attached to as a speculative view, and misappropriated in the cause of arguments and conflict, rather than as a ‘tool’ on the path of spiritual liberation. In the *Kosambiya Sutta*, the Buddha meets a group of monks who “had taken to quarrelling and brawling” and “could neither convince each other nor be convinced by others; they could neither persuade each other nor be persuaded by each other.”⁵⁶¹ The Buddha rebukes them because such conduct precludes the development of positive elements of the spiritual life, such as the cultivation of *mettā* (loving kindness):

“Bhikkhus, when you take to quarrelling and brawling and are deep in disputes, stabbing each other with verbal daggers, on that occasion you do not maintain acts of loving kindness by body, speech and mind in public and in private towards your companions in the holy life. Misguided men, what can you possibly know, what can you see, that you take to quarrelling and brawling ...Misguided men, that will lead to your harm and suffering for a long time.”⁵⁶²

At the beginning of the *Brahmajāla Sutta*, the Buddha describes recluses and brahmins who are ‘addicted to disputation’ and explains that he refrains from such conduct.⁵⁶³ This is echoed in the *Khandhavagga*, where the Buddha warns his disciples against being a ‘wager of wordy warfare’.⁵⁶⁴ The Simile of the Water-Snake in the *Alagaddūpama Sutta* provides perhaps the clearest warning against attaching to the Dhamma for the wrong reasons, namely for rebuking and criticising others rather than realising the way to liberation:

⁵⁶⁰M i 110; Bhikkhu Bodhi 202.

⁵⁶¹M i 321; Bhikkhu Bodhi 419.

⁵⁶²M i 321-2; Bhikkhu Bodhi 419.

⁵⁶³D i 8; Walshe 71.

⁵⁶⁴S iii 12; Woodward 13.

“Some misguided men learn the Dhamma — discourses, stanzas, expositions, verses, exclamations, sayings, birth stories, marvels and answers to questions — but having learned the Dhamma, they do not examine the meaning of those teachings with wisdom. Not examining the meaning of those teachings with wisdom, they do not gain a reflective acceptance of them. Instead they learn the Dhamma only for the sake of criticising others and winning in debates, and they do not experience the good for the sake of which they learned the Dhamma. Those teachings, being wrongly grasped by them, conduce to their harm and suffering for a long time.”⁵⁶⁵

Clinging to the Dhamma wrongly like this is likened to picking up a snake by the tail so that it swings round and gives a fatal bite — wrong grasp of the snake leads to harm and suffering just as wrong grasp of the Dhamma does. Having thus explained the dangers of clinging at the Dhamma, the Buddha explains how it should be understood with the simile of the raft. He describes a man in a dangerous place who builds a raft in order to get him across a river to the safety of the further shore. Once he arrives at the further shore he decides that, because the raft has been so helpful to him, he will carry it around with him. The Buddha explains that this is clearly a foolish thing to do, for the raft will no longer be of use to him on dry land. Instead he should cast it adrift and go where he chooses: “So I have shown you how the Dhamma is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of clinging.”⁵⁶⁶

All this suggests that what is important about the dhamma is not its cognitive content, but the factors from which it arises, and the way that it is held: “The Dhamma according to this sutta is to be regarded as a plan of action and not as a theory to be clung to and pitted against other theories in debate either for the purpose of defending it or criticising with its aid opposing theories.”⁵⁶⁷

It is through not understanding how views arise that one is ensnared in the ‘bond of view’:

“Here someone does not understand as it really is the rise and fall of view, the satisfaction and danger in view, and the escape from view; not knowing (all this) he is obsessed by the lust for view, the delight in it, the love, the infatuation, thirst and fever for it, the cleaving to it and the craving for it.”⁵⁶⁸

⁵⁶⁵M i 133; Bhikkhu Bodhi 227.

⁵⁶⁶M i 135; Bhikkhu Bodhi 229.

⁵⁶⁷Jayatilke, *Early Buddhist Theories of Knowledge* (London, Allen and Unwin, 1963), p. 223

⁵⁶⁸A ii 10; Woodward 12.

In the *Mahātaṇhāsankhāya Sutta*, the Buddha asks some monks many questions about dependent origination, and is satisfied with their answers. Nevertheless, he gives them a warning:

“Bhikkhus, purified and bright as this view is, if you adhere to it, cherish it, treasure it, and treat it as a possession, would you then understand the Dhamma that has been taught as similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of clinging?” — ‘No, venerable sir.’”⁵⁶⁹

What is particularly significant here is that views can still be ‘wrong’ even if they echo in content the teachings of the Buddha:

“What all this implies is that (false) view is as much a matter of the psychology and emotional attitude of the person holding a view as it is of the formal content of a view. The Buddhist tradition recognises that what is formally Buddhist theory can be grasped and held in a manner such that it constitutes wrong view.”⁵⁷⁰

We will now consider the many references that suggest that ultimately ‘right’ view is in fact a state of being beyond all views: instead of a view, it is simply seeing the way things really are.

Transcendent Right View

Transcendent Right View is dealt with in some detail in the *Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta*, which contains the monk Sāriputta’s explanation of right view to his disciples. As we have seen, there are two forms of right view, the ordinary (*lokiya*) and the transcendent (*lokuttara*). The *Sammādiṭṭhi Sutta* deals with right view in its transcendent aspect.

The sutta commences with some disciples asking Sāriputta: “In what way is a disciple of right view, whose view is straight, who has perfect confidence in the Dhamma and has arrived at this true Dhamma?”⁵⁷¹ It is interesting that this question itself provides some information about *ariyan* right view insofar as it describes it as ‘perfect confidence in the Dhamma’, and ‘arriving’ at the true dhamma, as though the Dhamma is a ‘state’ in which one can become immersed.

Sāriputta replies that one with right view understands what is unwholesome or ‘unskillful’ (*akusala*), and what is wholesome or skillful (*kusala*), and he understands the root of the unskillful and the skillful. There follows a definition of unskillful, which

⁵⁶⁹M i 261; Bhikkhu Bodhi 353.

⁵⁷⁰Rupert Gethin, “Wrong view (*micchā-diṭṭhi*) and Right View (*sammā-diṭṭhi*) in the Theravāda Abhidhamma,” in *Recent Researches in Buddhist Studies: essays in honour of Professor Y. Karunadasa*, (Colombo, Y. Karunadasa Felicitation Committee in Collaboration with the Chu Ying Foundation, Hong Kong, 1997), pp. 211-229, p.224.

⁵⁷¹M i 46; Bhikkhu Bodhi 132.

is explained in the terms of the ‘negative precepts’. Unskilful conduct is killing, taking what is not given, sexual misconduct, false speech, malicious speech, harsh speech, gossip, covetousness, ill-will, and wrong view.

The roots of the unskilful are greed, hatred and delusion,⁵⁷² which are the defilements that lie at the very heart of *samsāric* existence; the roots of the skilful are simply the opposite of these qualities, namely non-greed, non-hatred and non-delusion.

Sāriputta explains that when a disciple gains such an understanding of the unskilful and skilful and their roots, he has a liberating knowledge:

“When a noble disciple (*ariyasāvaka*) has understood the unwholesome ..., he entirely abandons the underlying tendency to lust, he abolishes the underlying tendency to aversion, he extirpates the underlying tendency to the view and conceit ‘I am’, and by abandoning ignorance and arousing true knowledge he here and now makes an end of suffering.”⁵⁷³

As the sutta progresses it is clear that this description of right view is but one ‘version’ or facet of right view. Having heard the above reply, Sāriputta’s disciples go on to ask him if there might be ‘another way’ in which an *ariyasāvaka* has right view. After explanation of further ways in which a disciple could have right view, the disciples repeat their question, so that by the end of the sutta there are thirteen ways in which right view is described. Each description is followed by the passage cited above in which it is explained that once such knowledge is attained, ignorance is abandoned and suffering is at an end. Twelve of the characterisations of right view concern each of the twelve links of dependent origination respectively. In each case, the *ariyasāvaka* understands the four noble truths in relation to the link in question. For example, in the case of birth, he understands birth, its arising (in this case, as a result of becoming), its cessation (with the ceasing of becoming), and the way to its cessation (the eightfold path). In addition to the twelve links of dependent origination, the disciple also understands the four noble truths in relation to the four ‘nutriments’. These are physical food, contact, mental volition and consciousness, and are four factors on which the continuity of life depends. Just like the twelve ‘links’, then, the nutriments are part of the causal process that underpins *samsaric* existence. They have craving as their condition.

It is apparent from these different descriptions of transcendent right view that the causal inter-relation between the different factors and causes of existence is the prime focus of the noble disciple’s understanding. Once he has seen for himself that all things are dependent on other factors for their being, and are therefore contingent and impermanent, then there is nothing at which to grasp. As we shall see in the course of

⁵⁷²M i 47; Bhikkhu Bodhi 133.

⁵⁷³Ibid.

this chapter, this relationship between insight and liberating knowledge is more explicitly explained in other suttas.

Transcendent Right View as Knowing and Seeing the Way Things Truly Are.

There are many passages in the Nikāyas in which speculative views are contrasted to ‘knowing and seeing’ things that the Buddha has taught. With such knowledge and vision, one ‘goes beyond’ views. For example, in the *Pañcattaya Sutta*, the Buddha lists various views about the whether the self is material or immaterial, percipient or inpercipient and so on. Instead of criticising these views, the Buddha says of each of them: “‘That is conditioned and gross, but there is cessation of formations.’ Having known ‘There is this,’ seeing the escape from that, the Tathāgata has gone beyond it.”⁵⁷⁴ The message here is elucidated by the paraphrase in the commentary:

“All those types of perceptions together with the views are conditioned, and because they are conditioned, they are gross. But there is nibbāna, called the cessation of formations, that is, of the conditioned. Having known ‘There is this’, that there is nibbāna, seeing the escape from the conditioned, the Tathāgatha has gone beyond the conditioned.”⁵⁷⁵

It is thus the Buddha’s insight into the causes and conditions of views that enables him to transcend them. In the *Aggivacchagottasutta*, it is explained that “‘Speculative view’ is something that the Tathāgatha has put away. For the Tathāgatha has seen this: ‘Such is material form, such is its origin, such its disappearance; such is feeling ... such is perception ... formations ... consciousness, such is its origin, such its disappearance.’”⁵⁷⁶ Bhikkhu Bodhi explains that the Pali contains a word play “between *diṭṭhigāta*, ‘speculative view’, which the Tathāgatha has put away, and *diṭṭha*, what has been ‘seen’ by the Tathāgatha with direct vision, namely the rise and fall of the five aggregates.”⁵⁷⁷ This demonstrates very clearly the contrast between views as a distorted creation of an ignorant mind, and the seeing that accompanies the mind freed from ignorance.

The ‘seeing’ does not simply involve accurately perceiving reality as it is, but brings liberation with it, for once one sees not-self, for example, one no longer clings to the impermanent as though it were permanent, and thus ceases to propagate the cycle of suffering within ones own perceptual activities. Thus, as Gethin emphasises, the cognitive and affective merge in views:

⁵⁷⁴M ii 231; Bhikkhu Bodhi 841.

⁵⁷⁵MA, taken from the translation by Bhikkhu Bodhi, p. 1303.

⁵⁷⁶M i 486; Bhikkhu Bodhi 592.

⁵⁷⁷Bhikkhu Bodhi, footnote to translation of M. p.1274.

“What seems to be significant about *ditṭhi*, is not so much the cognitive content of a view, but the fact we cling to it as a dogma, the fact that it becomes a fixed view; this alone is true, all else is foolishness. Thus even so-called ‘right views’ can be views (*ditṭhi*) in so far as they can become fixed and objects of attachment.”⁵⁷⁸

This is demonstrated in the *Pañcattaya Sutta*, where the Buddha explains that even cognitively correct views are still clinging if they are not the result of direct personal knowledge: “Since they have no clear, personal knowledge, even the mere fragmentary knowledge that those good recluses and brahmins clarify (about their view) is declared to be clinging on their part.”⁵⁷⁹

The connection between ‘seeing the way things really are’ and liberation is also evident in the *Khandavagga*, where it is explained how the noble disciple recognises the impermanence of body (and the other four *khandhas*). When the disciple *sees* impermanence of body he is no longer worried when it changes or ages: “Thus seeing as it really is, by perfect insight, he puts away from him all sorrow and grief, woe, lamentation and despair: nor is he troubled at their putting away, but untroubled, lives at ease ...”⁵⁸⁰ By the same token, one who sees things as they really are does not have views about the past or future, and “along with the fading away of ignorance and the arising of knowledge there comes to him no view that ‘I am’, that ‘this same I am’, that ‘things will be, things will not be, things will have body, things will not have body, things will be conscious, things will not be conscious ...’”⁵⁸¹ In the *Mahāsaḷāyatanika Sutta*, the Buddha explains in detail how not seeing the six senses as they really are leads to suffering. When, for example, one views the eye, eye-contact, eye-consciousness and the concomitant feeling in the wrong way (i.e. not as it actually is), then “one is inflamed by lust” for them:

“When one abides inflamed by lust, fettered, infatuated, contemplating gratification, then the five aggregates affected by clinging are built up for oneself in the future, and one’s craving — which brings renewal of being, is accompanied by delight and lust, delights in this and that — increases. One’s bodily and mental torments increase, one’s bodily and mental fevers increase, and one experiences bodily and mental suffering.”⁵⁸²

Conversely, the reverse of this process occurs when one understands the senses as they actually are (*yathābhūtaṃ*), for one then abides “uninflamed by lust” and mental torments and suffering are abandoned.

⁵⁷⁸Gethin, “Wrong View and Right View in Theravāda Abhidhamma”, p.8

⁵⁷⁹M ii 235; Bhikkhu Bodhi 844.

⁵⁸⁰S iii 43; Woodward 38.

⁵⁸¹S iii 46; Woodward 41.

⁵⁸²M iii 287; Bhikkhu Bodhi 1137.

In the *Māgandiya Sutta*, the Buddha provides an analogy which is very helpful in demonstrating how vision of the way things are lead to non-attachment. He describes a blind man who hears a man with good eyesight encouraging him to buy a clean, spotless white cloth. When the blind man agrees to buy it he is cheated, for he is actually given a 'dirty soiled garment'. Shortly after this, the man is treated for his blindness, and having taken medicines, he gains his sight. On doing so, he is repulsed by the sight of the dirty cloth, and becomes furious with the man who tricked him into buying it. In the explanation of this analogy, the Buddha likens himself to the doctor who enables the man's vision to arise; once a disciple sees the Dhamma his vision arises and, seeing the *khandhas* as they really are, he is no longer attached to them:

"If I were to teach you the Dhamma thus: 'This is that health, this is that nibbāna', you might know health and see nibbāna. Together with the arising of your vision, your desire and lust for the five aggregates affected by clinging might be abandoned. Then perhaps you might think: 'Indeed, I have long been tricked, cheated, defrauded by this mind. For when clinging, I have been clinging just to material form ...feeling ...perception ...formations ...consciousness. With my clinging as condition, being comes to be; with being as condition, birth; with birth as condition, ageing and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair come to be. Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering.'"⁵⁸³

This analogy is very helpful for understanding the Buddha's teaching of noble right view, because it suggests that it is simply seeing what is already the case. Rather than being something 'extra', some specialised cognitive viewpoint that has to be attained, it instead is how the world appears to one who has *got rid of* certain blinding and obscuring emotions or perceptions. The analogy demonstrates that the reality of the ordinary person is profoundly deceptive — one is attracted to or repulsed from things in the world in a manner that leads to suffering, unaware that the way this world appears is in fact fundamentally illusory. Owing to the defiling factors of the mind, the fundamental ignorance that underpins the ordinary person's perception of reality, this perception of the world *seems* entirely real and genuine. Indeed, as long as one perceives reality through the perceptual apparatus of the self-view, then it is true that certain events in the world (such as the death of a loved one, for example), will lead to suffering. It is not the suffering itself that is illusory, then, but it is the understanding of the world that leads to such suffering that is deceptive. In a sense, then, *dukkha* is ultimately a product of the unenlightened, ignorant mind — the ordinary person is 'tricked, cheated and defrauded by this mind.'⁵⁸⁴ In contrast, one who perceives the

⁵⁸³M i 511-2; Bhikkhu Bodhi 616.

⁵⁸⁴M i 511; Bhikkhu Bodhi 616.

world with right view, ‘as it really is’, is freed from *dukkha*, no longer under the spell of an illusory perception of reality.

This may be elucidated by a brief look at the understanding of right and wrong view found in the Theravādin *Abhidhamma*. Gethin explains that in the *Abhidhamma*, “treatment of *diṭṭhi* ... is considered to be exclusively a concomitant of *citta* rooted in greed (*lobha-mūla*): *diṭṭhi* can only be present in the mind when greed or attachment occurs: it is confined to four types of consciousness rooted in greed (Dhs 75, 80-82).”⁵⁸⁵ The stream-winner reaches a state where he his mind is freed from greed and delusion to a sufficient degree to be freed from all kinds of wrong view (*micchā-diṭṭhi*) — this is a sign that he has attained transcendent right view (*sammā diṭṭhi*), although his insight is not yet perfect and he has more to perfect, distinguishing him from the other three types of ariyasāvaka. Thus the stream-winner cannot hold speculative views, or any wrong views, because his mind is no longer rooted in the greed that prompts them: “once the four truths have been directly seen, the mind has no inclination to either eternalism or annihilationism, the mind has no tendency to misinterpret Buddhist theory in terms of either annihilationism or eternalism.”⁵⁸⁶

It is also significant that in the Theravādin *Abhidhamma*, transcendent right view (*sammādiṭṭhi*) and [wrong] view (*diṭṭhi*) are a different ‘species’ altogether — the former is a manifestation of wisdom, (*paññā*), and the latter “a particular psychological manifestation crystallisation of delusion and greed ... *sammādiṭṭhi* shares none of the characteristics of *diṭṭhi*.”⁵⁸⁷

Ultimately, then, ‘right view’ is ‘no view’ insofar as views, (*diṭṭhi*), are understood in the Nikāyas as the manifestations of the subjective bias of the unenlightened mind. Transcendent right view consists of simply seeing the way things are (*yathābhūtaṃ*). Jayatilleke explains that “what is taught by the Buddha is claimed to be objectively valid”⁵⁸⁸. In other words, what the Buddha points out to be true is always the case — it is not something of his invention that is contingent upon him for its truth. This point is made by the Buddha in the *Brahmanimantanika Sutta*: “Whether the Tathāgatha teaches the Dhamma to his disciples or does not preach it, the Dhamma remains the same.”⁵⁸⁹

The four noble truths are a natural law, a fact about how the world really is: “The fact of suffering is true, not false, not changeable. The fact of the arising of

⁵⁸⁵Gethin, “Wrong view and Right View in the Theravādin *Abhidhamma*,” p.219

⁵⁸⁶Gethin, “Wrong View and Right View”, p. 223.

⁵⁸⁷Gethin, “Wrong View and Right View”, p.224

⁵⁸⁸Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theories of Knowledge*, p. 428.

⁵⁸⁹M i 331 (Jayatilleke's translation differs from Bhikkhu Bodhi's: the latter translates it that the Tathāgatha remains the same, rather than the Dhamma. I find Jayatilleke's translation more consistent with other references to the same subject in the Nikāyas.)

suffering ...the ceasing of suffering ...the way to the ceasing of suffering is true, not false, not changeable.”⁵⁹⁰ Dependent origination, too, is portrayed as an objective fact: “Whether there is arising of Tathāgathas or whether there is no such arising, this nature of things ... stands, this causal status, this causal orderliness, the relatedness of this to that.”⁵⁹¹

It is because these elements of the Buddha’s teaching are in fact merely his description of the way the world is that they are something to be *seen*, and not merely an opinion or a hypothesis. The Buddha emphasises this when he describes how he knows dependent origination: “Apart from belief, apart from hearsay, apart from argument as to method, apart from reflection on and approval of opinion, I know this, I see this: decay and death is conditioned by birth.”⁵⁹² In the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, the Buddha rejects ten ways of attaining knowledge (including tradition, logic, hearsay, and reflection on and approval of opinions)⁵⁹³, contrasting them with knowing and seeing for oneself:

“Be not misled by report or tradition, or hearsay. Be not misled by proficiency in the collections, nor by mere logic or inference, nor after considering reasons, nor after reflection on and approval of some theory, nor because it fits becoming, nor by the thought: The recluse is revered by us. But ...when you know for yourselves: These things are unprofitable ... blameworthy ... conduce to loss and sorrow, — then indeed do you reject them.”⁵⁹⁴

For the Buddha, truth must be seen through personal knowledge:

“I am one of those recluses and brahmins who, having directly known the Dhamma for themselves among things not heard before, claim [to teach] the fundamentals of the holy life after having reached the consummation and perfection of direct knowledge.”⁵⁹⁵

The notion that transcendent right view consists of seeing what is already the case is supported by the Buddha’s description of himself. He uses terms such as “awakened”⁵⁹⁶ “one who knows and sees”⁵⁹⁷, “comprehending”, “thoroughly knowing”⁵⁹⁸, and “not liable to delusion”⁵⁹⁹, all indicating that he is able to clearly see

⁵⁹⁰S v 431; adapted from Woodward 365.

⁵⁹¹S ii 25; adapted from Rhys Davids 21.

⁵⁹²S ii 116; Rhys Davids 82.

⁵⁹³A i 189; Woodward 171-2.

⁵⁹⁴A ii 190; Woodward 200.

⁵⁹⁵M ii 211; Bhikkhu Bodhi 820.

⁵⁹⁶M i 214; Bhikkhu Bodhi 309.

⁵⁹⁷D i 147; Walshe 140.

⁵⁹⁸M i 279; Bhikkhu Bodhi, 369.

⁵⁹⁹M i 251; Bhikkhu Bodhi 343.

reality as it really is. This insight of the way things are is described in the *Āṅguttara Nikāya* as the ultimate knowledge: “Knowing things as they are, wherever they are, is the highest knowledge”⁶⁰⁰

The Buddha, then, could perhaps be described as a pioneer — he has attained a certain liberating knowledge through his personal insight, and is describing to others the way in which they, too, could gain the same insight: “There is a path, there is a course of training, whereby one who has followed it will know and see for himself ‘The ascetic Gotama speaks at the proper time, what is true, to the point — the Dhamma and the Discipline’.”⁶⁰¹ In the light of all this, Jayatilleke suggests that early Buddhism “should be regarded not as a system of metaphysics but as a verifiable hypothesis discovered by the Buddha in the course of his ‘trial and error’ experimentation with different ways of life.”⁶⁰²

Two levels of truth

In the above discussion of the different forms of right and wrong view, we have established that, on an ultimate level, all *lokiya* right views are ‘wrong’ in the sense that they are, on the final analysis, products of ignorance and craving. Transcendent right view, however, is ultimately true, insight into reality as it really is, undistorted by the deluding factors of ignorance and craving. However, one cannot have transcendent right view just by willing it; as we have seen, it is the culmination of a certain complex causal process that the Buddha expresses in his description of the path to liberation. Ordinary views are right insofar as they fit in with this causal process, causing development of path-factors in their positive aspect. Wrong views, however, work in the opposite direction.

One of the implications of this state of affairs is that a view that is ‘right’ or ‘true’ on the ordinary level, may actually be ‘false’ on the ultimate, transcendent level. For example, the idea that it is right to refrain from murdering one’s neighbour, and the concept that refraining from evil deeds will bring positive results both presuppose the distinction between self and other which, on the ultimate level, is seen to be false. Indeed, the five precepts presuppose the notion of the phenomenal self, a notion that is ultimately illusory and a product of ignorance. Collins argues that in practice, most Buddhists operate on the ordinary level: and the personality view provides the basis for their ethical conduct:

“Most Buddhists, therefore, have had a simpler view of personality and continuity than that which I have so far discussed ... Roughly, one might

⁶⁰⁰A v 37; adapted from Woodward 26.

⁶⁰¹D i 165; Walshe 152.

⁶⁰²Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, p.463.

say that this simpler view is the native westerner's view of reincarnation, in which a series of lifetimes, each containing a unitary 'individual', is somehow connected together as the successive lives of one 'person'. It is such an idea ...on which the religious practice of most Buddhists has depended, and which has been the main conceptual tool with which their view of psychology and ethics has operated."⁶⁰³

He goes on to explain that the "affective and cognitive selfishness" of ordinary right view is "socially and psychologically necessary" in that it provides the material that is ultimately deconstructed by *anattā*, the insight into not-self that accompanies transcendent right view. Thus lower right view is a step along the path; as the raft analogy implies, such views have their uses as vehicles on the path to liberation:

"For Buddhist thought, the existence of, (for example) enthusiastically self-interested merit-making is socially, psychologically and indeed logically necessary, as the raw material which is to be shaped by *anatta* ... For Theravāda doctrine, unreflective religious practice, and the perception of self and other which it involves — whether as a reaction pattern or an explicitly formulated Personality Belief — involves one or other of these two types of 'selfishness'. They are both fetters on the Path — *but without fetters there would be no liberation*."⁶⁰⁴

Lower right view, then, is 'true' in the sense that it accords with reality as it is perceived and understood by the ordinary person. Insight into reality as it really is, however, is true on an ultimate level, but this does not negate the provisional truth of lower right view:

"Both types of discourse are seen as containing truths, for two main reasons. In the first place, since the phenomenological reality of the 'ordinary man' and of the 'learner' on the Path is necessarily patterned according to the conceit 'I am', for them the discourse containing talk of unitary individuals will be — *pro tempore* — 'true'; secondly, ...for the most refined type of virtuoso Buddhism, doctrines which can be given verbal expression are in the last analysis simply instruments, tools for a spiritual culture which culminates by abandoning them in the 'silent wisdom' of the sage."⁶⁰⁵

Summary

⁶⁰³Collins, *Selfless Persons*, p. 150.

⁶⁰⁴Collins, *Selfless Persons*, pp. 152-3 [italics original].

⁶⁰⁵Collins, *Selfless Persons*, p. 150.

In this chapter a number of factors about the Buddha's attitude towards views have been established. There are two sorts of view, the ordinary and the transcendent. Ordinary views are ultimately a product of ignorance, the view of the unenlightened mind. This is demonstrated in the *Brahmajāla Sutta* where views are described as the "worry and vacillation of those immersed in craving."⁶⁰⁶ Similarly, in the teaching of the unanswered questions ordinary views are portrayed as the product of a fundamental 'misreading' of the world in terms of illusory concepts such as a notion of self. However, some ordinary views are more conducive to the development of the path in its positive aspect than others. These views are ordinary right views. Ordinary wrong views work against the causal process that culminates in liberation.

Transcendent right view describes the insight attained by a mind that is free of deluding factors of greed, hatred and delusion. Rather than being a 'view', it is rather a 'seeing of the way things really are'. When one sees the way things truly are, one is freed from suffering, for suffering is a product of an ignorant perception of reality.

This chapter has focused very much on theoretical aspects of the Buddha's teachings. Building on this foundation, the next chapter will look at those occasions in practice where the Buddha encounters other teachings and groups, and how he reacts to them.

⁶⁰⁶D i 40; Walshe 87.

CHAPTER FIVE: The Buddha's Attitude to Other Teachings

In this chapter we will look at the occasions in the Nikāyas when the Buddha encounters followers of other practices or deities, and the times when he expresses an opinion about their different forms of 'holy life'. The first part of this chapter will be devoted to the Buddha's more 'general' judgements about different ways of holy life, collected from various different suttas. These suttas will be examined in an attempt to discover if there is a general philosophy that informs the Buddha's encounters with other groups and a generalised criteria with which he judges them. The second part of this chapter will consist of suttas which describe the Buddha's encounters with specific groups. For convenience this is ordered into sections relating to wanderers (*paribbājakas*); Nigaṇṭhas (specific wanderers and the forefathers of the contemporary Jain religion) and Brahmins.

There is a large amount of material in the Nikāyas that relates to the Buddha's encounters with other groups. There are some suttas that directly relate the Buddha's reaction to others in such encounters, and others in which such encounters are incidental to the message of the sutta. There is, for example, an entire section in the Majjhima Nikāya, the *Paribbājakavagga* that is dedicated to relating the Buddha's encounters with specific other wanderers. However, the suttas in this section do not necessarily provide an account of what the Buddha thought of the wanderers or their teachings; rather, the questions put by the wanderers provide the Buddha with an opportunity to explain his own teaching. However, some of the suttas in the *Paribbājakavagga* are directly relevant to the project of this thesis, and where this is so, have been explained in some detail.

The same is true of the *Brāhmaṇavagga* of the Majjhima-Nikāya which, like the *Paribbājakavagga*, is a collection of suttas linked by a common characteristic — in this case, the Buddha's encounters with various Brahmins. This chapter does not contain a comprehensive list of all the suttas in which the Buddha encounters other groups since there is much irrelevant information or repetition in the suttas. As a result, I have chosen to consider 'representative' suttas which demonstrate the Buddha's attitude to other groups. It will be noted that, in all his encounters with other groups, the Buddha approves of other teachings in so far as they work in accordance with the 'causality of liberation'. In other words, he approves of those teachings or practices which lead to the development of the path to liberation, and disapproves of those which do not. The Buddha presents his own teaching and followers as the most accomplished in this regard.

As we saw in the introduction, in the Buddha's time there was a strong tradition of asceticism — there would have been many wanderers who, either by themselves or in groups, practised a world-renouncing asceticism in the hope of gaining freedom from continued suffering and rebirths. The Buddha's teaching came firmly within this tradition, and it is clear from the Nikāyas that the Buddha had many encounters with wandering ascetics or teachers with many different views and practices. The prevalence of other teachers and wanderers is testified by the Buddha's own life story — before he became enlightened he practised various different ascetic rituals and hardships with different groups before eventually discovering the way to liberation through his own conduct and meditative insight.

Views at odds with the Holy Life.

The *Sandaka Sutta* deals with Ānanda's (one of the Buddha's chief disciples) meeting with one such wanderer (*paribbājaka*), Sandaka. Ānanda goes to visit Sandaka and his large assembly of ill-disciplined wanderers, and at Sandaka's request, proceeds to teach them about four ways of *not* living the holy life (*abrahmacariya*) that is declared by the Buddha. The first type of 'doctrine and view' that 'negates the holy life'⁶⁰⁷ is the belief that "There is nothing given, nothing offered, nothing sacrificed; no fruit or result of good and bad actions; no this world, no other worlds . . ." ⁶⁰⁸ This list of beliefs continues, and echoes the Buddha's description of wrong view. The views culminate in an annihilationist claim: "Fools and the wise are alike cut off and annihilated with the dissolution of the body; after death they do not exist."⁶⁰⁹ In response to this view, then, a 'wise man' considers that, according to this teaching, even if he does not engage in an ascetic, disciplined way of life, he would still have 'lived the holy life' that is lived by the teacher of this doctrine, because there are no actions that he has to perform to fulfil this teaching. This means that the wise man and the teacher "are exactly equal here"⁶¹⁰, and that engaging in ascetic practices is pointless:

"It is superfluous for this good teacher to go about naked, to be shaven, to exert himself in the squatting posture, and to pull out his hair and beard, since I, who live in a house crowded with children, who use Benares sandalwood, . . . accept gold and silver, shall reap exactly the same destination, the same future course, as this good teacher."⁶¹¹

⁶⁰⁷M i 515; Bhikkhu Bodhi 619.

⁶⁰⁸Ibid.

⁶⁰⁹M i 515; Bhikkhu Bodhi 620.

⁶¹⁰Ibid.

⁶¹¹Ibid.

The very fact that the wise man is on an ‘equal footing’ with the teacher, and, having followed the teaching, is no ‘wiser’ than he was previously provides the decisive reason for rejecting the ‘holy way of life’: “‘What do I know and see that I should lead the holy life under this teacher?’ So when he finds that this way negates the living of the holy life, he turns away from it and leaves it.”⁶¹² Exactly the same format is followed for the remaining three ways of not-living the holy life. The second way involves the belief that actions do not have consequences — even if one were to go along the banks of the Ganges killing, torturing and mutilating others, and making others do the same, no evil action would have been done, and there would be ‘no outcome of evil’.⁶¹³ Similarly, if one were to act in a kind and giving way, there would be no merit in this. The third way is the belief that there is no ‘cause or condition’ for the purification or the defilement of beings. The fourth way consists of an extensive list of theories and hypotheses about how the universe is divided up and how it operates (through a theory of ‘seven bodies’), culminating in the view that everybody has a certain amount of rebirths to go through, and sooner or later, regardless of their actions, beings will attain liberation.

It is significant that none of these ‘ways of holy life’ are criticised directly on the grounds of the content of their views, but once again it is the consequences, the ‘fruits’ of these beliefs that is the focus. We have seen that acceptance of causal relations between actions and results is one of the elements of ordinary right view, which in turn is required for positive development of the spiritual path taught by the Buddha. Since the four teachings listed here are in total opposition to this right view, it follows that a teacher of them will not be particularly wise, and certainly not liberated. Similarly, the way of life itself will not bring with it many advantages. Thus the wise man who judges these ‘holy ways of life’ follows pragmatic criteria, rationally weighing up the advantages and disadvantages of living a particular way of life when he considers whether there is any purpose for undertaking ascetic practices, and whether he would know and see more as a consequence. We have seen in a previous section that the idea of causation is of fundamental importance to the teaching of the Buddha. The path to liberation is seen as a causal process, with knowledge and vision of the way things really are a product of this progression from ignorance to liberating insight. In the examples of the practices that negate the holy life in the *Sandaka Sutta*, the causality that is so fundamental to the Buddha’s teaching is denied in various different ways, with the result that adherents of these views do not attain knowledge and vision, and do not have anything to show for their ascetic practices. After each description of the four different ways, Ānanda explains:

⁶¹²Ibid.

⁶¹³M i 516; Bhikkhu Bodhi 620.

“This is the ...way that negates the living of the holy life that has been declared by the Blessed One who knows and sees, accomplished and fully enlightened, wherein a wise man certainly would not live the holy life (*brahmacāriya*), or if he should live it, would not attain the true way, the Dhamma that is wholesome.”⁶¹⁴

In this context, *brahmacariya* is not just a generic term for different ‘religious’ ways of life, but is in fact a reference to *the* holy life, namely the course of causal development that culminates in liberation from *saṃsāra*, and which is seen by the Buddha from his position of pure knowledge and insight. The four other modes of practice are not criticised on any grounds other than that they are not conducive to development along the course to liberation. They do not achieve what they set out to gain, because they deny the natural law of causation, and work in opposition to it.

‘Comfortless’ Views Rejected Because of Their Means of Knowledge.

The first part of the *Sandaka Sutta*, then, deals with the practices and views that are completely at odds with the Buddha’s *brahmacariya*. These views work in direct opposition to the teaching that the Buddha sets out. The second half, however, deals with *brahmacariya* which, although not in total opposition to the Buddha’s *brahmacariya*, still do not result in the fruits of the true holy life set forth by the Buddha. Whilst these teachings are not completely disapproved of by the Buddha they have only a very limited potential for development along the path to liberation. The four types of *brahmacariya* listed here are described as *anassāsika*, meaning ‘giving no comfort or security’. Unlike the four ways of ‘negating’ the holy life, they “do not totally undermine the principles of the holy life, but they also fail to offer the prospect of attaining the ultimate fruits of spiritual discipline.”⁶¹⁵ The first example under this category is of a teacher who claims to be omniscient, but clearly is not; realising this, a wise man no longer follows his teachings. Here, then, the criticism is against false teachers — although what they are teaching may ultimately be true, they are not in a position to know this for themselves or guide others to that knowledge, thus their ‘holy life’ is ‘without comfort.’ The second example attacks the means of knowledge by which a particular teaching is known:

“here some teacher is a traditionalist, one who regards oral tradition as truth; he teaches a Dhamma by oral tradition, by legends handed down, by what has come down in scriptures. But when a teacher is a traditionalist,

⁶¹⁴e.g., M i 515-6; Bhikkhu Bodhi 620.

⁶¹⁵Bhikkhu Bodhi, n749; p1279.

one who regards oral tradition as truth, some is well remembered and some is wrongly remembered, some is true and some is otherwise.”⁶¹⁶

Here, once again, no criticism is made of the *content* of the teaching, but it is rejected by the wise man for the unreliability of its method of transmission. There is no ‘security’ in this holy life for the teaching might be poorly represented or badly understood.

The third type of holy life in this category is a teaching that is based on reason and enquiry. Just like the tradition-based teaching, however, this method of knowledge is rejected as unreliable, for the teacher may be inconsistent in his thinking: “He teaches a Dhamma hammered out by reasoning, following a line of inquiry as it occurs to him. But when a teacher is a reasoner, an inquirer, some is well reasoned and some is wrongly reasoned, some is true and some is otherwise.”⁶¹⁷

The fourth type of holy life that lacks comfort or security does so because the teacher of it is “dull and confused” — he is one of the ‘eel-wrigglers’ mentioned in the *Brahmajāla Sutta*. A wise man will reject this holy life because: “This good teacher is dull and confused ...he engages in verbal wriggling, in eel-wriggling: ‘I don’t say it is like this. And I don’t say it is like that. And I don’t say it is otherwise. And I don’t say it is not so. And I don’t say it is not not so.’”⁶¹⁸

In the second half of the *Sandaka Sutta*, then, it is the teachers of particular doctrines and the methods that they use to attain knowledge, that is the focus of criticism. It is interesting that there is no mention of *what* they teach, but simply their means of knowledge. This seems to suggest that if one has a poor teacher who uses unreliable methods or who is ‘dull and confused’, it is immaterial what he is teaching, because one could not be sure which of his teachings were ‘genuine’, and which were not.

The eight ‘holy ways of life’ that are treated in this sutta are disapproved of for one of two reasons — the first four are seen as totally at odds with the true *brahmacariya* advocated by the Buddha, and the second four are rejected as unsatisfactory because of their means of knowledge.

The ‘True’ *brahmacariya*: Personal Insight as a Valid Means of Knowledge.

⁶¹⁶M i 520; Bhikkhu Bodhi 624.

⁶¹⁷Ibid.

⁶¹⁸M i 521; Bhikkhu Bodhi 625.

Having listed these eight types of holy life that are somehow deficient or unreliable, Ānanda contrasts them with the *brahmacariya* set forward by the Buddha, which is the yardstick against which the other traditions are judged, “wherein a wise man certainly would live the holy life, and while living it would attain the true way, the Dhamma that is wholesome.”⁶¹⁹ Ānanda’s explanation of this ‘true’ *brahmacariya* follows the set formula that appears in many of the other suttas⁶²⁰ in which a householder goes forth, perfects skilful ethical practices, abandons the five hindrances and progresses through the four *jhānas*, and is able to attain liberating knowledge of the way things really are. Once again in this description, the operation of a causal process is strongly emphasised — the formula describes a process of gradual development that progresses causally. The various events are presented as simple causal fact, as though what is being described is a law of nature, something that will inevitably be the case were the right conditions to be put in place. Indeed, throughout the entire sutta, apart from the terms *abrahmacariya* and *anassāsika*, there are no ‘value judgement’ terms in relation to the eight teachings. Instead the views and the fruitlessness of following them are plainly listed in the manner of simple facts. Sandaka makes reference to this approach at the end of the *Sutta*: “It is wonderful, Master Ānanda, it is marvellous! There is no lauding of one’s own Dhamma and no disparaging of the Dhamma of others; there is the teaching of the Dhamma in its full range, and so many emancipated ones appear.”⁶²¹

We have already considered the idea of ‘salvific causation’, namely the idea that in teaching the Dhamma, the Buddha pointed out a natural law or process that occurs in reality, regardless of whether anybody teaches it or believes in it. Ānanda’s treatment of other teachings in the *Sandaka Sutta* supports this interpretation, for his criteria for judgement is whether or not a particular teaching works in accordance with this natural law. In his book, *Early Buddhist Theory of Knowledge*, Jayatilleke analyses the epistemology that the Buddha appears to espouse in the Nikāyas. His findings lend further support to the view that in his teachings, the Buddha is simply describing a natural law, a causality that operates in objective reality. Jayatilleke explains that around the time of the Buddha, ‘religious’ thinkers could be divided up into three categories, according to their emphasis on particular means of knowing⁶²². The first of these, the Traditionalists, included those who derived their knowledge entirely from a scriptural tradition. The Brahmins of the Three Vedas provide one example of this type of thinker. As we have seen in the *Sandaka Sutta*, this way of

⁶¹⁹Ibid.

⁶²⁰The first example of this in MN is in the Kandaraka Sutta. M i 344 ff. Bhikkhu Bodhi 448ff

⁶²¹M i 523-4; Bhikkhu Bodhi 628.

⁶²²Jayatilleke, *Early Buddhist Theories of Knowledge*, p.170. Jayatilleke explains that these categories should not be seen as too rigid - they are not necessarily mutually exclusive.

attaining knowledge was rejected by Ānanda as unreliable, because the scriptures could be wrongly remembered.

The second category that Jayatilleke uses is that of The Rationalists — thinkers who claimed to attain knowledge entirely through the process of reasoning and speculation. This class includes Sceptics, Ājīvikas, metaphysicians of the Early Upaniṣads, and Materialists and is the third sort of holy life that is criticised as *anassāsika* in the *Sandaka Sutta*.

Finally, Jayatilleke introduces the third category as ‘Experientialists’, thinkers “who depended on direct personal knowledge and experience, including extra sensory perception on the basis of which their theories were founded.”⁶²³ Groups in this category include many thinkers of the Middle and Late Upaniṣads, some Jains, and some Ājīvikas.

Jayatilleke then cites a passage in the *Saṅgārava Sutta* in which the Buddha explains where he would place himself in this categorisation. This is a very interesting passage, worth quoting at length, for in it the Buddha is directly comparing himself to other teachers. He is approached by a Brahmin woman who is confused by the presence of so many recluses and brahmins, all of whom claims to have true knowledge:

“‘Master Gotama, there are some recluses who claim [to teach] the fundamentals of the holy life after having reached the consummation and perfection of direct knowledge here and now. Where among these recluses and brahmins does Master Gotama stand?’”⁶²⁴

The Buddha responds that there is a ‘diversity’ among those who claim to have this knowledge:

“There are some recluses and brahmins who are traditionalists, who on the basis of oral tradition claim [to teach] the fundamentals of the holy life after having reached the consummation and perfection of direct knowledge here and now; such are the brahmins of the Three Vedas. There are some recluses and brahmins who, entirely on the basis of mere faith, claim [to teach] the fundamentals of the holy life after having reached the consummation and perfection of direct knowledge, such are the reasoners and investigators. There are some recluses and brahmins who, having directly known the Dhamma for themselves among things not heard before, claim [to teach] the fundamentals of the holy life after having reached the consummation and perfection of direct knowledge...I, Bhāradvāja, am one of those recluses and brahmins who, having directly known the Dhamma

⁶²³Ibid.

⁶²⁴M ii 211; Bhikkhu Bodhi 820.

for themselves among things not heard before, claim to teach the fundamentals of the holy life after having reached the consummation and perfection of direct knowledge.”⁶²⁵

According to the Buddha, then, personal knowledge is the criteria for gaining liberating insight. It is not unreliable like the other means of knowledge, which all rely on some form of authority that might be flawed. In the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, there are passages where the Buddha addresses a follower and urges him against being misled by various different forms of authority:

“Come now, Bhaddiya, be not misled by report⁶²⁶ (*anussava*) or tradition (*paramparā*) or hearsay (*itikirā*). Be not misled by proficiency in the Collections (*piṭakasampadā*), nor by mere logic or inference, nor after considering reasons, nor after reflection of and approval of some theory, nor because it fits becoming, nor by the thought: The recluse is revered by us.”⁶²⁷

Instead, the Buddha advocates personal knowledge:

“When you know for yourselves: These things are unprofitable, these things are blameworthy, these things are censured by the intelligent, these things, when performed and undertaken, conduce to loss and sorrow — then, indeed, Bhaddiya, do ye reject them.”⁶²⁸

This attitude to various different forms of knowledge echoes the *Brahmajāla Sutta* in some ways. For example, the *Brahmajāla Sutta* deals with some views held by ‘logicians’ and ‘reasoners’ who arrive at their views through ‘hammering it out by reason’⁶²⁹. In the *Brahmajāla Sutta*, however, the content of these views, and the consequences of holding them, are more the object of criticism than the means by which they are attained. In the passages above, it is the unreliability of the methods of knowledge that are the subject of the Buddha’s criticism.

In the *Caṅkī Sutta*, the Buddha elaborates further on his attitude towards different means of attaining knowledge. His stress on attaining personal knowledge is evident when he is asked by a brahmin student about the traditional and scripture-based practices of the Brahmins of the Three Vedas:

⁶²⁵Ibid.

⁶²⁶Horner’s translation of *anussava* as ‘report’ is not particularly clear. Jayatilleke (p.180) identifies three senses in which the word is used in the Nikāyas. Firstly, as it is used in the Vedic tradition, it could mean ‘divine revelation’, an original insight revealed from a divinity that is handed down through generations; secondly it could refer to an ‘authoritative tradition’; and thirdly it could mean a ‘report’ come from mouth to mouth.” All these are rejected under the same criteria

⁶²⁷A ii 192; Woodward 202. See also A i 189; Woodward 200.

⁶²⁸Ibid.

⁶²⁹D i 21; Walshe 78.

“Master Gotama, in regard to the ancient brahmanic hymns that have come down through oral transmission and in the scriptural collections, the brahmins come to the definite conclusion: “Only this is true, anything else is wrong”. What does Master Gotama say about this?”⁶³⁰

The Buddha answers by pointing out that there is not one teacher amongst the present brahmins, nor among the generations of brahmins before them, nor even amongst the ancient brahmin seers who could say: “I know this, I see this: only this is true, anything else is wrong.” In other words, there is nobody within the entire tradition who has definite personal knowledge of what they teach. The Buddha judges this state of affairs with an analogy:

“Suppose there were a file of blind men each in touch with the next: the first one does not see, the middle one does not see, and the last one does not see. So, too, Bhāradvāja, in regard to their statement the brahmins seem to be like a file of blind men: the first one does not see, the middle one does not see, and the last one does not see. What do you think ...that being so, does not the faith of the brahmins turn out to be groundless?”⁶³¹

Bhāradvāja responds that the brahmins do not just depend on faith, but also on oral tradition. The Buddha’s response provides another summary of his attitude towards different forms of knowledge:

“Bhāradvāja, first you took your stand on faith, now you speak of oral tradition. There are five things, Bhāradvāja, that may turn out in two different ways here and now. What five? Faith (*saddhā*), approval (*ruci*), oral tradition (*amussava*), reasoned cogitation (*ākāraparivītakka*), and reflective acceptance of a view (*diṭṭhinijjhānakkhanti*). These five things may turn out in two different ways here and now. Now something may be fully accepted out of faith, yet it may be empty, hollow, and false; but something else may not be fully accepted out of faith, yet it may be factual, true and unmistaken. Again, something may be fully approved of ...may be well cogitated, ... may be well reflected upon, yet it may be empty, hollow and false, but something else may well not be reflected upon, yet it may be factual, true and unmistaken. [Under these conditions] it is not proper for a wise man who preserves truth to come to the definite conclusion: ‘Only this is true, anything else is wrong.’”⁶³²

Coming to such a conclusion is ‘not proper’ because the individual does not have personal knowledge of a doctrine’s truth or falsity, and, as we have seen, this is

⁶³⁰M ii 169; Bhikkhu Bodhi 779.

⁶³¹M ii 170-1; Bhikkhu Bodhi 780.

⁶³²M ii 170-1; Bhikkhu Bodhi 780.

the only criteria the Buddha accepts as a valid means of knowledge. For each of the five categories, a claim could be either true or false, but the point is that there is no way of knowing whether this is the case — none of these five ways could lead to personal knowledge, they are “not capable of yielding certainty.”⁶³³

Bhāradvāja then asks the Buddha how there is ‘the preservation of truth’ (*saccānurakkhana*). The Buddha replies that when one is faced with claims derived from unreliable means of knowledge, the appropriate response is to withhold judgement:

“If a person has faith, Bhāradvāja, he preserves truth when he says: ‘My faith is thus’; but he does not yet come to the definite conclusion: ‘Only this is true, anything else is wrong.’ In this way, Bhāradvāja, there is the preservation of truth; in this way, he preserves truth; in this way we describe the presentation of truth. But as yet there is no discovery of truth (*saccānubodha*)”⁶³⁴

It is interesting here that the Buddha does not automatically disapprove of all views which are grounded in the unreliable means of knowledge — indeed, he acknowledges that some of them could be ‘factual, true and unmistaken’. The fact is, however, that one can only know this for certain through personal experience, and until one has attained this, then one should not claim that one knows the exclusive and definitive truth. Thus in the *Caṅkī Sutta*, the Buddha does not object to individuals holding certain beliefs, but simply insists that if the ‘truth’ is to be ‘preserved’, then such beliefs should be held provisionally, until personal verification is found

The Correct Attitude for an Ordinary Person.

As the *Caṅkī Sutta* progresses, the Buddha explains how truth *is* discovered by describing the right attitude to be adopted in relation to teachers of the Dhamma. A householder who comes across a Bhikkhu should investigate whether the monk is freed from states based in greed, hatred and delusion, and whether or not he says “I know” when he does not know, or “I see” when he does not see. He decides as a result of this investigation that the bodily and verbal conduct of the bhikkhu is consistent with one who is freed from greed, hatred and delusion, and that the Dhamma he teaches is so profound that he must be a very wise man. Having been satisfied in these respects, the householder places his faith in the teacher. As we can see from the account below, the householder verifies the teachings for himself

“filled with faith he visits him and pays respect to him; having paid respect to him he gives ear; when he gives ear, he hears the Dhamma; having heard

⁶³³Bhikkhu Bodhi, n 885, p.1297.

⁶³⁴M ii 171; Bhikkhu Bodhi 780.

the Dhamma, he memorises it and examines the meaning of the teachings he has memorised; when he examines their meaning, he gains a reflective acceptance of those teachings; when he has gained a reflective acceptance of those teachings, zeal springs up; when zeal has sprung up, he applies his will; having applied his will, he scrutinises (*tūleti*), having scrutinised, he strives; resolutely striving, he realises with the body the ultimate truth and sees it by penetrating it with wisdom. In this way, Bhāradvāja, there is the discovery of truth; in this way one discovers truth; in this way we describe the discovery of truth.”⁶³⁵

In the commentary it is explained that the stage of ‘scrutinising’ represents insight meditation, when one sees the four noble truths and impermanence. ‘Discovering truth’ represents the stage of becoming a streamwinner. We have already seen that a streamwinner is able to see things as they really are: this is reinforced here by the idea that the stream-winner has discovered ‘the truth’. This message reflects the teaching found in the *Vīmaṇisaka Sutta*, where the Buddha encourages his disciples to “make an investigation of the Tathāgatha in order to find out whether or not he is fully enlightened.”⁶³⁶ Having been satisfied by the Tathāgatha’s conduct and words, the disciple should listen to his teachings, until “through direct knowledge (*abhiññā*) of a certain teaching here in that Dhamma, the bhikkhu comes to a conclusion about the teachings.”⁶³⁷ As a result of this investigation, the disciple places confidence in the Tathāgatha, the Dhamma and the Saṅgha. This process of personal verification leads to an unshakeable confidence:

“Bhikkhus, when anyone’s faith has been planted, rooted, and established in the Tathāgatha through these reasons, terms, and phrases, his faith is said to be supported by reasons, rooted in vision, firm; it is invincible by any recluse or brahmin or god or Māra or Brahmā or by anyone in the world.”

All this information helps to build up a picture of how the Buddha viewed his role and how this differed from other religious adherents. We have already seen how he rejects all means of depending on authority because it is unreliable, be it the authority of revelation, tradition, scripture or reason. However, the Buddha himself is in an authoritative role as a teacher, but as the above passages demonstrate, his authority is grounded in personal experience. It is only when a disciple has scrutinised the Buddha’s characteristics and his teachings, and found him to be pure and wise, that they can firmly establish confidence in him. Thus what distinguishes the authority of

⁶³⁵M ii 173; Bhikkhu Bodhi 782.

⁶³⁶M i 317; Bhikkhu Bodhi 415.

⁶³⁷M i 319-20; Bhikkhu Bodhi 417.

the Buddha from the other forms of authority that he rejects is the fact that anybody who scrutinises his conduct will see for themselves that his behaviour is consistent with his claim to be fully enlightened, and that when one follows the course of conduct that he advocates, then one can experience for oneself the truth of his teachings. With the other forms of authority that the Buddha criticises, one never gets to personal experience, but merely an infinite regress of appeals to authority. Thus the faith or confidence in the Buddha that is ‘invincible’ is of a different order to the faith that the Buddha rejects as one of five unreliable forms of authority in the *Cankī Sutta*. This can be summed up as the difference between faith as a form of confidence born out of experience, and ‘blind’ faith, which involves adherence to a proposition regardless of the evidence for or against its truth.

Once again, it is important to remember that the Dhamma is not presented as a phenomenon of the Buddha’s invention — it is simply the way the world really is when perceived by an undeluded mind. The Buddha’s authority comes from the fact that he is in a position of superior knowledge. The Buddha is able to see reality as it really is; and is able to teach others how to attain this insight. He is a guide, somebody who shows others the path to enlightenment having travelled it himself. The Buddha himself does not directly ‘endow’ his disciples with the insights of the noble disciple (*ariyāsavka*), but shows them the way to realise these attainments for themselves.

The Superiority of the Buddha’s teachings: the *Mahāsīhanāda Sutta*

The *Mahāsīhanāda Sutta* provides one of the clearest examples of the Buddha’s approach to other groups and teachings, and his claim to superiority over them. The Buddha explains how, out of the many different teachings that are around, there are some which in part agree with his teachings, and some which disagree:

“There are some ascetics and Brahmins who are wise, skilled, practised in disputation, splitters of hairs, acute, who walk cleverly along the path of views. Sometimes their views accord with mine, sometimes they do not. What they sometimes applaud, we sometimes applaud: what they sometimes applaud, we sometimes do not applaud ...”⁶³⁸

He then goes on to explain his approach to such groups:

“On approaching them I say: ‘In these things there is no agreement, let us leave them aside. In these things there is agreement: there let the wise take up, cross-question and criticise these matters with the teachers or with their followers, saying: ‘Of those things that are unskillful and reckoned as such, censurable, to be refrained from, unbecoming a Noble One, black, and reckoned as such — who is there who has completely abandoned such

⁶³⁸D i 162; Walshe 152.

things, and is free from them: the ascetic Gotama, or some other venerable teachers?”⁶³⁹

The same question is considered in relation to the cultivation of “those things that are skilled and reckoned as such, blameless, to be practised, fitting for a Noble One, bright and reckoned as such ...”⁶⁴⁰ Here, then, the emphasis on scrutiny and investigation is clearly evident — the Buddha invites a wise man to consider whether the Buddha ‘practises what he preaches’, and decide whether his conduct is in accordance with his teachings. Since the Buddha considers himself to be supreme in terms of his wisdom and conduct, he explains that this will be evident when he is compared to other teachers — whereas the Buddha can be seen to have ‘completely freed himself’ from the unskilled factors, and ‘completely mastered’ the skilled ones, the other reverend teachers have done so “only in part”⁶⁴¹. Once again, the Buddha is not completely dismissive of other teachers — he does recognise that they have partial success in developing positive, skilful states and causing negative ones to diminish. He does not directly disparage other teachers, but simply points to the evidence as though it speaks for itself; by comparing his conduct and wisdom with that of other teachers the Buddha’s superiority in this regard will be self-evident. He does not directly disparage other teachers, but simply points to the evidence as though it speaks for itself; by comparing his conduct and wisdom with that of other teachers the Buddha’s superiority in this regard will be self-evident.

In the next part of the sutta, exactly the same format is repeated, but this time substituting ‘the order of the ascetic Gotama’s disciples’ and ‘that of the other reverend teachers’ for ‘the ascetic Gotama’ and ‘other reverend teachers’. The fact that the wisdom and skilful conduct of the Buddha’s disciples is superior to other groups is a testament to the fact that the teaching and example that they follow is superior to any other. As the sutta progresses, the Buddha advocates his doctrine through a simple statement of fact, explaining his knowledge that there is a path to liberation, and that anybody who follows it will know for themselves that he is speaking the truth on this matter:

“There is a path, there is a course of training, whereby one who has followed it will know and see for himself: ‘The ascetic Gotama speaks at the proper time, what is true, to the point — the Dhamma and the Discipline.’ What is this path, this course of training? It is the Noble Eightfold Path ...”⁶⁴²

⁶³⁹D i 163; Walshe 152.

⁶⁴⁰Ibid.

⁶⁴¹Ibid.

⁶⁴²D i 164; Walshe 152.

Kassapa then lists some of the various ascetic practices carried out by other ascetic teachers, including asceticism regarding clothing, food, sleeping and washing. The Buddha's response to this list is to point out their irrelevance in defining one as an 'ascetic or Brahmin':

"Kassapa, a practiser of self-mortification may do all these things, but if his morality, his heart and wisdom are not developed and brought to realisation, then indeed his is still far from being an ascetic or a Brahmin. But, Kassapa, when a monk develops non-enmity, non ill-will and a heart full of loving-kindness and, abandoning the taints, realises and dwells in the uncorrupted deliverance of mind, the deliverance through wisdom, having realised it in this very life by his own insight, then, Kassapa, that monk is termed an ascetic and a Brahmin."⁶⁴³

He then goes on to explain that this kind of asceticism is harder to achieve than the sort listed by Kassapa — if becoming a Brahmin or an ascetic were a question of only eating certain foods, then 'any householder or householder's son — even the slave-girl who draws water — could do this'⁶⁴⁴ The Buddha offers "a very different kind of asceticism and Brahmanism" which is much harder to achieve, because it depends on the development of 'morality, of the heart, and of wisdom', not just the performance of certain ritual practices. The Buddha defines the development of morality, the heart and wisdom in terms of the standard description of the gradual progress towards enlightenment. The perfection of morality comes at the stage when one has developed the five precepts in their positive aspects; the perfection of the heart is attained when one has reached the four jhānas, and the perfection of wisdom comes when a monk sees reality as it really is, and destroys the taints (*āsavas*). This is described as the ultimate achievement: "And Kassapa, there is nothing further or more perfect than this perfection of morality, of the heart, and of wisdom."⁶⁴⁵

This sutta pronounces the ultimate efficacy of the Buddha's teaching, which is unsurpassed by any other. This claim is made explicitly as the sutta draws to a close regarding morality, 'self-mortification and scrupulous austerity', 'wisdom' and 'liberation', the Buddha acknowledges that there are other ascetics and Brahmins who teach all of these things. However, regarding each one (for example, morality), he makes the following claim: "But as regards the highest Ariyan morality, I do not see any who have surpassed me in this. I am supreme in this regard, in super-morality"⁶⁴⁶ He then anticipates any criticism that his disciples are not content with his teachings, such criticisms would be unfounded and should be responded to as follows

⁶⁴³D i 167; Walshe 153-4.

⁶⁴⁴D i 168; Walshe 154.

⁶⁴⁵D i 174; Walshe 155.

⁶⁴⁶Ibid.

“ ‘The ascetic Gotama roars his lion’s roar, in company and confidently, they question him and he answers, he wins them over with his answers, they find it pleasing and are satisfied with what they have heard, they behave as if they were satisfied, they are on the path of truth, and they are satisfied with the practice.’ ”⁶⁴⁷

The simple justification for following the guidance and the teaching of the Buddha as opposed to that of any other teacher is that he is more accomplished in wisdom and morality than any other teacher:

“For the perfection of the moral code (concentration, insight, etc.), I should live under another recluse and brahmin, paying him honour and respect. But I see not anywhere in the world of gods — Māras, Brahmas — not among recluses and brahmins, not among the whole race, human or divine, any other recluse, or any brahmin more accomplished in moral conduct than myself, and under whom I might live, paying him honour and respect.”⁶⁴⁸

The motivation for following the Buddha and joining the Sangha, then, is that both are the best qualified to bring one to the goal of the cessation of suffering:

“Among all the teachers now existing in the world, I see none who has attained to such a position of fame and following as I have. Of all the orders and groups of the world, I see none as famous and well-followed as my sangha of monks. If anyone were to refer to any holy life as being fully successful and perfect, with nothing lacking and nothing superfluous, well-proclaimed in the perfection of its purity, it is this holy life they would be describing.”⁶⁴⁹

The message of prioritising development of the ‘morality, the heart and wisdom’ over other ascetic practices is a theme that arises consistently in other suttas. In the *Samyutta Nikāya*, for example, the Buddha explains the futility of such practices as “Wearing rough hides and matted hair and filth, Chantings, and empty rites and penances”, describing them as “vain” and “empty as a treasure gotten in a dream”⁶⁵⁰. Instead, one must cultivate the heart: “A heart well-tamed, made pure and undefiled. Considerate for every living thing — That is the way the highest to attain.”⁶⁵¹ In the *Vatthūpama Sutta*, the Buddha asks the brahmin Sundarika Bhāradvāja what good it is

⁶⁴⁷D i 175; Walshe 156.

⁶⁴⁸S i 138; Rhys Davids, p. 175.

⁶⁴⁹D iii 126; Walshe 431.

⁶⁵⁰S iv 117; Woodward, p. 74.

⁶⁵¹Ibid. See also S i 169; Rhys Davids, p. 212: “Nay, brahmin, deem not that by mere wood-laying comes purity. Verily that is external. To him who this purification seeketh. By things without none is made pure ...”

to worship fires or to bathe in ‘holy’ waters, because “They cannot purify an evil-doer, A man who has done cruel and brutal deeds”. Instead he advocates the development of morality:

“It is here, brahmin, that you should bathe,
To make yourself a refuge for all beings,
And if you speak no falsehood
Nor work harm for living beings
Nor take what is offered not
With faith and free from avarice,
What need for you to go to Gayā?
For any well will be your Gayā.”⁶⁵²

The efficacy or futility of certain practices is demonstrated by explaining the kind of rebirth that they lead to; in the *Bhayabheravasutta*, the Buddha explains that any beings “who were possessed of good conduct in speech . . . thought, who did not scoff at the Ariyans, holding a right view, incurring deeds consequent on a right view — these, at the breaking up of the body after dying, have arisen in a good bourn, a heaven world.”⁶⁵³ Those with wrong conduct, however, are reborn in a bad bourn, Niraya hell. Significantly, the criteria here does not include ‘following’ the Ariyans, but merely not disrespecting them or actively disparaging them; this would be a form of wrong view, wrong speech or wrong thought, and would work against the positive process of causality that enables one to progress along the path. This seems to imply that, at a preliminary (i.e. ordinary) level at least, one’s allegiance to different teachers is secondary to the conduct one exercises. It does not matter who one follows — as long as they act skilfully then they will have a good rebirth. This point is made explicitly in the following passage from the *Anguttara Nikāya*:

“Monks, if a monk . . . ascetic . . . Jain . . . shaveling . . . him with braided hair . . . the wanderer . . . the follower of Maganda . . . of the sect of the triple staff . . . of the unobstructed . . . of the sect of Gotama . . . of deva rites . . . follow the course of five things, he will be cast into hell. What five? He destroys life, takes the not given . . .”⁶⁵⁴

What is particularly significant is that here, followers of the Buddha, the ‘sect of Gotama’, are included in this list — no matter what one’s allegiance, liberation is not automatic, but depends upon skilful conduct. This is as true for followers of the

⁶⁵²M i 39; Bhikkhu Bodhi 121.

⁶⁵³M i 22-23; Bhikkhu Bodhi 106.

⁶⁵⁴A iii 272; Hare 199-200.

Buddha as it is for any adherents to any other teachings. The focus is very much upon personal effort in the realm of moral conduct:

“To bring about (life in) the heaven-worlds, it is of no use for an Ariyan disciple, yearning for heaven, either to pray for it or to think much of it; the steps that lead to heaven must be stepped by the Ariyan disciple, and when those steps are stepped by him, they lead to the winning of heaven, and he is a winner of the heaven world.”⁶⁵⁵

One does not have to be a follower of the Buddha to avoid being reborn into an unpleasant realm; even if one does not have faith in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, but still has energy, effort, mindfulness, skilful conduct, and moderately approves of the Buddha’s teaching, then one is not destined for an unpleasant rebirth. If, however, the ultimate goal is not simply a pleasant rebirth, but the cessation of suffering, then the perfection of moral conduct is not enough. In the *Subha Sutta*⁶⁵⁶, Ananda highlights the supremacy of the Buddha’s achievement and the consequent superiority of his teachings. He explains that no other school of wanderers have attained the perfection of morality, and even if they had, since they have not attained full insight, then they would think that they had reached the goal of their asceticism, when in fact there is still concentration and wisdom to perfect.

The supremacy of the Buddha’s attainment, and the fact that the ‘holy life’ is ‘fully successful and perfect’ in the way that he teaches it, does not mean that there is no value or efficacy in other teachings: some passages in the Nikāyas put a strong emphasis on acceptance and tolerance of other schools. In the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, the Buddha describes different levels of insight to be found amongst other teachers: “Some wanderers are fools without understanding; but some will know of one who has attachment — he has some attached remainder and some will know of one who has no attachment — he has none.”⁶⁵⁷ Similarly, some will find happiness in this life and the next as a result of their good conduct:

“Any recluses and brahmins whatever in whom has arisen irregular actions and who quickly casts them out, represses them, ends them, brings them to nothing, both fares happily here without trouble, despair and yearning, and at the separation of the body, after death, has to expect a happy destiny”⁶⁵⁸

This message is consistent with the idea of liberative causation — since the process of cause and effect that the Buddha points out is a natural law, it follows that it operates for everybody. The stage of moral perfection, however, is a preliminary one —

⁶⁵⁵A iii 47; Hare 39-40.

⁶⁵⁶D i 204-210; Walshe 171-74.

⁶⁵⁷A iv 381; Hare 254.

⁶⁵⁸S ii 151; Rhys Davids 107.

according to the Buddha, other teachers do not know how to progress further than that because they have not discovered this way for themselves. A follower of their teachings, then, is at a disadvantage because their teacher is ill-qualified to guide them. Although there may well be parts of their teaching that accord with the path towards liberation, it is ultimately incomplete. When a wanderer, Susima, converts to following the Buddha he explains in strong terms the difference between his present teacher and his former one: “When compared with the attainment of an Ariyan disciple who has won vision, of the person who has understanding, the attainment of recluses and brahmins who are Wanderers, heretical teachers, does not make up the hundredth, the thousandth, the hundredth thousandth part.”⁶⁵⁹ In the Sutta Nipāta, there is a passage where the Buddha uses an analogy of three fields; he likens an excellent, fertile field to his ordained disciples, a moderate field to his lay-disciples, and a poor field to wanderers of other sects. The Buddha sows seed (representing the Dhamma) on all of the fields, but it is harder for the seeds to flourish on the ground of poorer quality:

“Then just like that field that is poor, hard, saltish, of bad soil, are wandering recluses and brahmins that hold other views than mine. I teach them the dhamma that is lovely ... I make known to them the righteous life that is wholly and utterly pure. Why so? Because if it so be they can understand a single sentence, that will be for their profit and happiness for many a long day.”⁶⁶⁰

Living under another discipline or following another teacher, then, places one at a disadvantage, as the Buddha explains to the wanderer Bhaggava:

“It is hard for you, Bhaggava, holding different views, being of different inclinations and having a different teacher, to attain and remain in the deliverance called ‘the Beautiful’. You must strive hard, putting your trust in me, the Buddha.”⁶⁶¹

The passages we have seen so far, then, are not totally dismissive of other teachings, insofar as the Buddha recognises that other modes of practice can produce positive, skilful effects, and enable the practitioner to progress at least some way along the path to liberation. However, there is also a clear message that it is only the Buddha who knows the way to liberation in all its completeness, having discovered it for himself. He is thus the only truly reliable guide, and anybody who follows a different teaching is disadvantaged because their teachers or guides are not sufficiently qualified with the correct knowledge and experience to point to the right way.

⁶⁵⁹S ii 137; Rhys Davids 99.

⁶⁶⁰S iv 313; Woodward 221-2.

⁶⁶¹D iii 35; Walshe 383. D iii 42; Walshe 387. M ii 43; Bhikkhu Bodhi 664

Udumbarika-Sīhanāda Sutta: Acceptance of Other Teachings.

I now wish to consider a passage in the *Dīgha Nikāya* that sits rather uneasily with this message of the Buddha's superiority. It seems fair to assume (since the Buddha alone knows the way to complete liberation, and that wanderers of other sects will not attain this goal if they follow their inferior teachers) that the Buddha would urge members of other sects to follow his teaching and abandon their own. Indeed, in the last passage cited, the Buddha urges Bhaggava to switch his trust to the Buddha. We will now consider a certain passage from the *Udumbarika-Sīhanāda Sutta*⁶⁶² where this message is apparently contradicted with a thoroughgoing tolerance of other practices. This sutta gives an account of the Buddha's meeting with a group of wanderers called the Udumbarikas, under the leadership of an individual called Nigrodha. Nigrodha invites the Buddha to one of his assemblies of wanderers, believing that he will be able to outwit the Buddha, to "baffle him with a single question, ...knock him over like an empty pot."⁶⁶³ When the Buddha (who has telepathically understood Nigrodha's intention) arrives, Nigrodha asks him to explain "What is this doctrine in which the Blessed Lord trains his disciples, and which those disciples whom he has so trained as to benefit from it recognise as their principal support, and the perfection of the holy life?"⁶⁶⁴ The Buddha does not reply directly, but makes the statement that we have already seen elsewhere, that is hard for Nigrodha, who is subject to different influences, teachings and inclinations, to understand the Buddha's doctrine. Then, instead of explaining the Dhamma, the Buddha asks Nigrodha about his teaching: "how are the conditions of austerity and self-mortification fulfilled, and how are they not fulfilled?"⁶⁶⁵ This response in itself fills the Udumbarikans with respect for the Buddha who make a great commotion and exclaim: "It is wonderful, it is marvellous how great are the powers of the ascetic Gotama in holding back with his own theories and inviting others to discuss theirs!"⁶⁶⁶

Nigrodha quickly silences his followers, and only partially answers the Buddha's question. He admits that his group teach and adhere to "higher austerities", but asks the Buddha what would constitute their fulfilment or non-fulfilment. The Buddha replies at length, describing many different ascetic practices, such as wearing and sleeping on thorns, refusing to drink water, and ritually bathing three times a day. Having heard this list, Nigrodha maintains that, by these practices, the 'higher austerity' is fulfilled. The Buddha, however, disagrees, maintaining instead that "this

⁶⁶²D iii 36-57; Walshe 385-394.

⁶⁶³D iii 38; Walshe 386.

⁶⁶⁴D iii 29; Walshe 386.

⁶⁶⁵D iii 40; Walshe 387.

⁶⁶⁶Ibid.

higher austerity can be faulted in many ways.”⁶⁶⁷ He then provides an extensive list of such faults. For example, a self-mortifier who succeeds in his practice might become pleased with himself and disparage others, becoming “intoxicated with conceit”, alternatively he might practice for financial gain and status in the eyes of kings and ministers. The Buddha goes on to list a series of such faults, including lying and jealousy, that can follow from the wrong attitude towards ascetic attainments. It is significant that one of the faults listed is withholding assent when “the Tathāgatha or a disciple of the Tathāgatha presents the Dhamma in a way that should command his assent.”⁶⁶⁸ Nigrodha agrees that all of these factors represent faults in the self-mortifier. The Buddha then repeats the list of attainments, but this time without the negative response to them, so that the self-mortifier is indeed ‘purified’ by his actions. Having heard this list, Nigrodha expresses the view that the higher austerity “attains its peak there, penetrating to the pith.”⁶⁶⁹ The Buddha’s response at this stage follows the same pattern that we have seen in the other suttas, for he maintains that what, according to Nigrodha, is the pinnacle of achievement, is only a preliminary stage in the Buddha’s scheme: “No, Nigrodha, it does not attain its peak there, penetrating to the pith. It has only reached the outer bark.”⁶⁷⁰ He then explains how the pith *is* attained with a description of the gradual path to nibbāna, beginning with the ‘fourfold restraint’ of not harming living beings, not taking the not given, not lying, and not craving for sense pleasures, and progressing through the four jhānas until the four freedoms of mind are attained. At the end of this exposition, the Buddha explains that he has answered Nigrodha’s original question about what doctrine the Buddha teaches his disciples: “It is by something more far-reaching and excellent that I train them, through which they . . . recognise as their principal support, and the perfection of the holy life.”⁶⁷¹ Nigrodha is clearly convinced and repents his former arrogance, asking the Buddha to accept him as one of his followers. The Udumbarikans are thrown into confusion when they recognise the inferiority of their own tradition: “We and our teacher are ruined! We know of nothing higher or more far-reaching than our teaching.”⁶⁷²

So far, then, this sutta follows the line of the others we have looked at — whilst Nigrodha’s teaching and practices can be beneficial, they do not go far enough and could not lead one to liberation. In this respect, they are inferior to the teachings of the Buddha. At this point in the Sutta, however, there is an apparently ‘tolerant’

⁶⁶⁷D iii 42; Walshe 387.

⁶⁶⁸D iii 45; Walshe 389.

⁶⁶⁹D iii 48; Walshe 390.

⁶⁷⁰Ibid.

⁶⁷¹D iii 52; Walshe 392.

⁶⁷²Ibid.

passage where, despite all the arguments pointing to the superiority of the Buddha's discipline, he appears to urge the other wanderers to stay within their own discipline:

"You may think 'The ascetic Gotama says this in order to get disciples.' But you should not regard it like that. Let him who is your teacher remain your teacher. Or you may think: 'He wants us to abandon our rules.' But you should not regard it like that. Let your rules remain as they are. Or you may think, 'He wants us to abandon our way of life.' But you should not regard it like that. Let your way of life remain as it is. Or you may think: 'He wants to establish us in the doing of things that according to our teaching are wrong and are considered wrong among us.' But you should not regard it like that. Let those things that you consider wrong continue to be so considered. Or you may think: 'He wants to draw us away from things that according to our teaching are good and are so considered among us.' But you should not regard it like that. Let those things that you consider good continue to be so considered. Nigrodha, I do not speak for any of these reasons

There are unwholesome things that have not been abandoned, tainted, conducive to rebirth, fearful, productive of painful results in the future, associated with birth, decay and death. It is for the abandonment of these things that I teach Dhamma. If you practise accordingly, these tainted things that make for purification will develop and grow, and you will attain to and dwell, in this very life, by your own insight and realisation, in the fullness of perfected wisdom."⁶⁷³

At first sight, this passage appears to portray a message of extreme tolerance. The Buddha explicitly states that these other wanderers should let their way of life remain 'as it is'. Since their way of life is not the same as that espoused by the Buddha — and therefore is not the holy life in all its fullness and perfection — it follows that the Buddha would not agree with some of their teachings and practices. It may even be the case that, according to the Buddha, things that are 'good' according to these other wanderers are in fact 'bad' (i.e. unskillful or irrelevant to the path) according to the Buddha. It is something of a surprise, then, that he should apparently condone the continuation of 'inferior' practices.

This apparently anomalous extract is best made sense of when understood as referring to the Buddha's *intention*. For throughout the passage, the Buddha is keen to avoid having his reasons for teaching misunderstood. He gives a list of falsely attributed motives for why he is teaching, and rejects them all by insisting that the wanderers "should not regard it like that." His insistence that the wanderers should

⁶⁷³D iii 57; Walshe 394.

carry on as they are is perhaps best understood as a form of denying these false motives. If the Buddha was really motivated by wanting to gain disciples from another teacher, he would never urge these disciples to remain with their teacher. The fact that the Buddha does say this means that it cannot possibly be the case that his motivation is to take disciples away from somebody else. It is as though the Buddha expresses these tolerant attitudes in order to demonstrate his argument.

The first paragraph, then, is devoted to explaining what the Buddha's motivation is *not*; the second, in contrast, describes what does motivate the Buddha to teach. It begins with a description of some of the various manifestations of suffering, and is followed by the Buddha's statement that he teaches Dhamma for "the abandonment of these things." If one follows the Dhamma, then one reaches the state of perfected wisdom where suffering ceases — it is this goal that drives the Buddha's teaching. We have already seen from the evidence of other suttas, however, that following the Dhamma is sometimes hindered or obstructed by the practices of other groups — the best way to follow the Dhamma is to follow the teachings of the Buddha. This inevitably means that for a group like, for example, the materialist Ajīvikas, who deny the operation of kamma, this indeed means abandoning at least some of their practices and values in order to follow the Dhamma. For some wanderers, at least, following the Dhamma for the abandonment of suffering would mean abandoning their way of life, and abandoning their teacher. It is thus hard to see how the Buddha's claim that there is a specific way of practising in order to gain liberation can rest with his insistence that he does not want to change the practices of other groups. This apparent inconsistency only appears to make sense when the meaning is restricted to the Buddha's motivation. If this is the case, then the Buddha is arguing that, while he is teaching things that may contradict and conflict with other teachings and philosophies, he is not doing it just for the sake of gaining extra disciples, or undermining a certain teaching. He is simply teaching the path to the cessation of suffering, and this is his sole concern. Although his teaching may have the effect of making a follower of a particular group redefine their sense of good and bad, or transform their way of life, this is a corollary of, and not the sole purpose of, the Buddha's teaching of the Dhamma.

This philosophy is elucidated in other passages in the Nikāyas where the Buddha encourages his disciples not to judge other groups, but simply to teach Dhamma. On one such occasion he instructs his followers how to behave when they meet wanderers with other views; he tells them neither to approve or disapprove of their teachings, but just to teach to them. If a teaching is not conducive to positive development of the path, a disciple should not tell the other group that they "have entered upon the wrong way", but simply state the consequences of holding false or

unhelpful doctrines or practices: “‘The pursuit is a state beset by suffering, vexation, despair, and fever, and it is the wrong way’, then one teaches only the Dhamma”.⁶⁷⁴

The Buddha himself demonstrates this approach when he is asked to evaluate the teachings of different wanderers:

“‘Master Gotama, there are these recluses and brahmins, each the head of an order, the head of a group, the teacher of a group, a well-known and famous founder of a sect regarded by many as a saint - that is, Pūraṇa Kassapa, Makkhali Gosāla, ... the Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta. Have they all had direct knowledge as they claim, or have none of them had direct knowledge, or have some of them had direct knowledge and some not?’”⁶⁷⁵

The Buddha refuses to be drawn into such a judgement, presumably because it is not beneficial to the development of the path: “‘Enough, let this be. I shall teach you the Dhamma.’”⁶⁷⁶

These passages thus seem more concerned with approach in dealing with other groups, rather than judging the value of their teachings. The fact that the Buddha does not advocate direct criticism of other schools by his followers, or attempts to take others away from their original teachings and practices should not be read as a form of acceptance of their teachings as equal in value or efficacy.

Specific Groups

Having considered some of the general philosophy that informs the Buddha’s judgement of other schools, we will now look at those occasions in the Nikāyas where the Buddha or his followers explicitly mention or encounter wanderers of other sects.

To begin with we will look at the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*, in which the Buddha mentions six other wanderers by name, and points out their type of homeless life as fruitless. We will then consider the sections in the *Majjhima Nikāya* where the suttas dealing with the Buddha’s encounters with wanderers and brahmins are grouped together into *vaggas*, or sections.

Wanderers and Ascetics (*Paribbājakas and Samaṇas*).

Sāmaññaphala Sutta

The *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* directly follows the *Brahmajāla Sutta* in the *Dīgha Nikāya*. In it, King Ajātasattu resolves to visit a recluse or brahmin who is able to “bring peace

⁶⁷⁴M iii 232; Bhikkhu Bodhi 1082.

⁶⁷⁵M i 198; Bhikkhu Bodhi 291.

⁶⁷⁶Ibid.

to our heart". His ministers suggest six different wandering ascetics that may be able to bring him peace, but the King is silent because on previous visits to each of these teachers, he was unsatisfied with their answers to his question about the rewards that are the fruit of the homeless life. When the King goes to consult the Buddha, he explains what happened in his encounters with these other teachers, and recounts how unsatisfactory he found them. He is then satisfied with the Buddha's answers to his questions, and becomes a follower of the Buddha.

In this sutta other wanderers are used for the polemical purpose of throwing into relief the fruitfulness of the Buddha's way of life. Bhikkhu Bodhi suggests that the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* is deliberately placed after the *Brahmajāla Sutta* to offer a positive statement about the right way of practising after explaining how *not* to practise:

"the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* takes over precisely where the *Brahmajāla Sutta* leaves off ...whereas the *Brahmajāla Sutta* has the negative task of pointing out the dangers and futility inherent in wrong views, the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* sounds a triumphant and lyrical proclamation of the fruitfulness of a course of spiritual training founded upon right view."⁶⁷⁷

Each of the six teachers that the king finds unsatisfactory are representative of views outside orthodox Brahmanism — as we shall see presently, the Buddha deals with the brahmins at length elsewhere in the *Majjhima Nikāya*. The views attributed to these teachers cover a spectrum of wrong views, ranging from views that can be placed in the 'at odds with the holy life' category of the *Sandaka Sutta* (p. 160ff.) to those which are in the 'without comfort or security' category. The first teacher that the king describes to the Buddha is Pūraṇa Kassapa, who is a naked wanderer. When the King asks him "Can you point to ...a reward visible here and now as a fruit of the homeless life?", Pūraṇa Kassapa does not answer the question, but simply begins teaching his beliefs about the inefficacy of action in which he denies that either good or bad actions bears fruit. His teachings, as a complete denial of the causality so central to the Buddha's teachings, correspond to the first way that negates the holy life described in the *Sandaka Sutta*. Interestingly, however, the views in themselves are not directly criticised — instead, the King is displeased at Pūraṇa Kassapa's failure to answer the question: "Just as if on being asked about a mango tree he were to describe a bread-fruit tree, or on being asked about a breadfruit tree he were to describe a mango, so Pūraṇa Kassapa, on being asked about the fruits of the homeless life, explained non-action to me."⁶⁷⁸ Even then, however, the King's reason for not

⁶⁷⁷Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Discourses on the Fruits of Reclusheship*, pp.1-2.

⁶⁷⁸D i 53; Walshe 94.

employing Pūraṇa Kassapa in his court is not presented in the form of a direct criticism of Pūraṇa Kassapa — instead, the king explains how he did not want to live with a constant feeling of displeasure towards somebody in his kingdom:

“I thought, ‘How should one like me think despitefully of any ascetic or Brahmin dwelling in my territory?’”, so I neither applauded nor rejected Pūraṇa Kassapa’s words but, though displeased, not expressing my displeasure, saying nothing, rejecting and scorning speech, I got up and left.”⁶⁷⁹

For each of the six teachers, whatever the view expressed, King Ajātasattu has the same response — when each teacher in turn fails to answer his question, he does not express his displeasure, but simply leaves, regardless of the view that has just been expressed.

The second teacher to see the king is Makkhali Gosāla, who is the leader of the Ājīvikas, a group of wanderers with fatalistic doctrines. Bhikkhu Bodhi explains that Makkhali Gosāla was an early associate with the Jain teacher, Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta before they were driven apart by a split. The Ājīvikas maintained that the entire cosmos was controlled by destiny or fate (*niyati*), and therefore denied the efficacy of human effort or action, thus directly opposing the view set forth by the Buddha. As a spokesman for this philosophy, Makkhali Gosāla tells King Ajāsattu that there is “no cause or condition for the purification of beings”⁶⁸⁰ but that all beings go through six pre-determined spells of rebirth before automatically reaching an end of suffering when this time is completed.

The third teacher, Ajita Kesakambalī is a materialist who is a mouthpiece for the sort of views that we have seen the Buddha explicitly reject as wrong views in other suttas; for example, the belief that “there is no fruit or result of good and bad deeds ... fools and wise, at the breaking-up of the body, are destroyed and perish, they do not exist after death.”

The fourth teacher, Pakudha Kaccāyana, similarly denies the basis for moral action, but for the very different reason that he believes that the individual soul is indestructible, and that the seven items of earth, water, fire, air, pleasure, pain and the life-principle are all uncreated and stable, not subject to impermanence. As a result, Pakudha believes that one cannot be guilty of killing another being, thus placing this teaching morally and philosophically at odds with the Buddha’s.

The next teacher mentioned is the leader of the Jains, Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta. Walshe argues that the characterisation of the Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta’s views in this sutta are a parody, for the ‘fourfold restraint’ that is mentioned (“He is curbed by all curbs,

⁶⁷⁹Ibid.

⁶⁸⁰D i 53; Walshe 94-5.

enclosed by all curbs, cleared by all curbs, and claimed by all curbs.”⁶⁸¹) do “not represent genuine Jain teaching.” The ‘genuine’ fourfold restraint taught by the Jains is largely concerned with the avoidance of evil. Bhikkhu Bodhi suggests that, since the Jains agree with the fruitfulness of the holy life and ultimately claim to bring an end to suffering, “to have introduced these views here would have required divergence from the forward movement of the sutta.”⁶⁸² Elsewhere, however, there are some detailed and more accurate presentations of Jain beliefs, and the Buddha’s opinion of them⁶⁸³.

The last teacher to be mentioned is Sañjaya Belaṭṭhaputta who is a sceptic. His views directly correspond to those of the eel-wrigglers in the *Brahmajāla Sutta*, for he answers all questions with evasion, and, like all the other teachers, does not even begin to address the question put to him by the King.

Each of these six teachers and the viewpoints they express are found on other occasions in the Nikāyas. Although the teachers are not mentioned, the materialist, antinomian, fatalist and atomist views expressed by Ajita Kesakambalī, Pūraṇa Kassapa, Makkhali Gosāla and Padukha respectively form the four types of *abrahmacariyavāsā* in the *Sandaka Sutta*.⁶⁸⁴ Basham explains that there are some passages in the Nikāyas where the deterministic views expressed by Makkhali Gosāla in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* are attributed to Pūraṇa Kassapa.⁶⁸⁵ He explains that the views expressed by both at different times are “those most characteristic of the later Ājīvikas.”⁶⁸⁶

When King Ajātasattu has finished describing these encounters, the Buddha makes no comment about the different teachers. Instead he answers the king’s question about the fruits of the homeless life thoroughly, explaining these initially as ‘material’ advantages, insofar as a monk is treated with more reverence and respect than those in many other roles. He then gives the description of the gradual path to liberation, beginning with the arising of faith in the Tathāgatha and the perfection of morality, and explains the fruits of each stage, such as contentment, health, calm and so on. Ultimately a disciple knows that he has attained the cessation of suffering, and thus attains the most perfect of the fruits of the homeless life.⁶⁸⁷

There are a number of significant things about this sutta. Firstly, we have already seen the Buddha’s emphasis on the importance of ‘knowing and seeing’ for oneself. In the *Cankī Sutta*⁶⁸⁸, we saw how the Buddha advocates the ‘preservation of

⁶⁸¹D i 57; Walshe 97.

⁶⁸²Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Discourse of the Fruits of Reclusheship*, p. 7.

⁶⁸³See below p. 202213.

⁶⁸⁴M i 514-5; Bhikkhu Bodhi 619-620.

⁶⁸⁵See for example S iii 69; Woodward 61. S v 126; Woodward 107. A iii 383; Hare 273.

⁶⁸⁶A. L. Basham, *History and Doctrine of the Ājīvikas*, p. 23.

⁶⁸⁷D i 63-86; Walshe 99-109.

⁶⁸⁸M ii 173; Bhikkhu Bodhi 781.

truth' by investigating a teacher and seeing if he lives up to his teachings and his reputation. This is what King Ajātasattu does in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* — he goes to see various different teachers and 'investigates' them by asking them a question. The reader or hearer of the sutta is presented with the evidence that the King finds as a result of this investigation, and the Buddha himself does not speak against these views — the fact that the other six teachers fail to answer the King's question is allowed to speak for itself. This relates to the Buddha's insistence that the Dhamma is the way things really are — since it is the Truth, it speaks for itself. Similarly, unlike the other six teachers, the Buddha does not immediately summarise his doctrinal beliefs when faced with the King's question. Instead, he describes a process of conduct whereby one can discover the Dhamma for oneself.

We can infer from what we are told in other suttas, particularly the *Sandaka Sutta*⁶⁸⁹, and the *Brahmajāla Sutta*⁶⁹⁰, that all the views attributed to the six teachers are in fact wrong views, because they fail to provide philosophical justification for those factors, such as restraint from killing, that provide the foundations for positive development towards the cessation of suffering. However, no such direct judgement is given in the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta*. The views are not judged in themselves, but it is their advocates who undermine them by being unable to answer the King's question, demonstrating a blindness to his needs and an attachment to expressing their own views that casts doubt upon their wisdom and sensitivity as teachers. In contrast, the Buddha is able to answer the question fully and in such a way that the King develops significantly along the path that the Buddha describes. In this way, the wisdom and superior knowledge and insight of the Buddha is highlighted in comparison to the ignorance of the six teachers.

Paribbājakavagga

The *Paribbājakavagga* of the Middle Fifty Suttas of the Majjhima Nikāya (*Majjhimapaṇṇāsapāḷi*) consists of reports of the Buddha's dealings with other wanderers whom he meets, or who come to seek him out. In the seventh sutta of this section, the *Mahāsakulāyi Sutta*, the six teachers of the *Sāmaññaphala Sutta* are mentioned again. A wanderer called Sakuludāyin meets the Buddha, and explains that he has heard of the six teachers, but has also heard that they are not universally venerated. For example, in the case of Pūraṇa Kassapa, he has heard that "This Pūraṇa Kassapa is the head of an order ...regarded by many as a saint, yet he is not honoured, respected, revered, and venerated by his disciples, nor do

⁶⁸⁹M i 513-524; Bhikkhu Bodhi 618-628.

⁶⁹⁰D i 1; Walshe 67.

his disciples live in dependence on him, honouring and respecting him.”⁶⁹¹ He then explains why Kassapa is not venerated — when he was teaching Dhamma to ‘several hundred of his followers’, some of his followers urged others not to ask him certain questions, because he would be unable to answer them. Instead, only they, Kassapa’s followers, were able to answer. Kassapa objected, ‘waved his arms and wailed’ and demanded the right to answer the question. We then learn that many of his disciples left having refuted Kassapa’s doctrine: “‘Your doctrine is refuted. You are proved wrong. Go and learn better, disentangle yourself if you can!’”⁶⁹²

The same formula is repeated for each of the remaining five teachers — they are “scorned by the scorn shown to their Dhamma”.⁶⁹³ Sakuludāyin then explains that, in contrast, he has heard that the Buddha’s followers are united in their reverence for him, and that when he teaches they listen in rapt silence and concentration. Even those who fall out with their companions and return to lay life still speak well of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha, blaming themselves and not others. The Buddha then asks Sakuludāyin whether he can identify any of the qualities for which he is so revered. Importantly, this question moves the emphasis away from hearsay, and on to Sakuludāyin’s personal experience.

Sakuludāyin then goes through a series of qualities for which the Buddha is revered, beginning with his exemplary way of living, and moving on to his perfect morality and wisdom. We are told that the Buddha possesses the supreme aggregates of virtue and wisdom. In contrast to the other teachers who know things only through tradition, revelation and hearsay, the Buddha has direct personal knowledge of what he teaches, and this is why his teaching is ‘convincing’: “The recluse Gotama teaches the Dhamma through direct knowledge, not without direct knowledge; he teaches the Dhamma with a sound basis, not without a sound basis; he teaches the Dhamma in a convincing manner, not in an unconvincing manner.”⁶⁹⁴ The Buddha then explains that, since he is possessed of the supreme aggregate of wisdom he is able to refute any doctrines taught by others: “It is impossible that he should not foresee the future courses of doctrine⁶⁹⁵ or that he should not be able to confute with reasons the current doctrines of others.”⁶⁹⁶

⁶⁹¹M ii 3; Bhikkhu Bodhi 630.

⁶⁹²Ibid.

⁶⁹³Ibid.

⁶⁹⁴M ii 9; Bhikkhu Bodhi 635.

⁶⁹⁵Bhikkhu Bodhi understands this statement to mean that “the Buddha understands all of the unexpressed implications of his own doctrine as well as of his opponents’ doctrines.” (p. 1281, note 761.) He also suggests that, as in the *Brahmajāla Sutta*, the Buddha “has laid down a critique applicable to any doctrine that might arise in the future course of religio-philosophical thought.” (Ibid.)

⁶⁹⁶M ii 10; Bhikkhu Bodhi 635.

Here, then, wanderers of other sects are criticised on two broad grounds — firstly, their followers are ill-disciplined and argumentative, and do not revere their teacher. Instead, the teacher has to compete with them, for some followers believe they know more than he does. Secondly, the teachers themselves are not respected simply because they are not worthy of the respect — they are not able to answer all the questions put to them. In contrast, the worthiness of the Buddha's Dhamma is testified by the respectful behaviour of his followers, by the Buddha's conduct, and by the depth and extent of his knowledge.

The theme that other wanderers are lacking in direct knowledge and make empty or hollow claims is one that informs many of the suttas in this section. In the *Māgandiya Sutta*, the Buddha speaks to a wanderer, Māgandiya, who maintains that "The greatest of all gains is health, nibbāna is the greatest bliss."⁶⁹⁷ He understands 'health' to refer to physical health, and nibbāna to be the state of enjoying physical health and happiness. The Buddha replies that Māgandiya is ensnared and blinded by the sense pleasures, and not knowing anything of any worlds beyond the sense-sphere, believes that sense pleasures are the highest bliss. He is like a blind man who accepts a dirty, soiled rag having been told it is a beautiful, spotless cloth, by an unscrupulous salesman. The blind man's mistake is to accept the cloth simply out of faith in the man with eyesight, without 'knowing and seeing' for himself. The Buddha explains how it is just the same with wanderers from other sects who do not know and see for themselves: "...the wanderers of other sects are blind and visionless. They do not know health, they do not see nibbāna, yet they utter this stanza thus: 'The greatest of all gains is health, nibbāna is the highest bliss.'"⁶⁹⁸

The Buddha explains that the claim about health and nibbāna has been misappropriated by ordinary people who have incompletely remembered a stanza taught by previous Buddhas, which explains that the eightfold path is the way to the Deathless. Ordinary people, however, have not remembered this part — they, including Māgandiya, do not have "that noble vision" (*ariya cakkhu*) by which they can know and see health and nibbāna, and instead blindly identify the greatest health as referring to the physical body, which is in fact "a disease, a tumour, a dart, a calamity, and an affliction."⁶⁹⁹ Continuing the analogy of the blind man, the Buddha explains his role as a physician, who recommends to the blind man a course of treatment which restores his sight and enables him to see for himself that the cloth he once believed was spotless and pure is in fact filthy and ragged. So by following the teaching of the

⁶⁹⁷M i 509; Bhikkhu Bodhi 613.

⁶⁹⁸M i 510; Bhikkhu Bodhi 614.

⁶⁹⁹M i 510; Bhikkhu Bodhi 615.

Buddha, Māgandiya can know health and see nibbāna for himself, and therefore free himself of the clinging to the five aggregates (*khandhas*) which causes suffering.

On hearing the Buddha speak thus, Māgandiya gains confidence in the Buddha, and believes that “Master Gotama is capable of teaching me the Dhamma in such a way that I might rise up from this seat and be cured of my blindness.”⁷⁰⁰ The Buddha then suggests the course of action that Māgandiya must now take:

“Māgandiya, associate with true men. When you associate with true men, you will hear the true Dhamma. When you hear the true Dhamma, you will practise in accordance with the true Dhamma. When you practise in accordance with the true Dhamma, you will know and see for yourself thus: ‘These are diseases, tumours, and darts; but here these diseases, tumours and darts cease without remainder. With the cessation of my clinging comes the cessation of being; with the cessation of being, the cessation of birth; with the cessation of birth, ageing and death, sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair cease. Such is the cessation of this whole mass of suffering.’”⁷⁰¹

This passage highlights the difference between the ‘blind faith’ possessed by wanderers of other sects in this passage, and the faith or confidence possessed by a disciple of the Buddha. For the Buddha’s disciple, faith is a preliminary step, that which enables one to progress along the course of action that the Buddha recommends, allowing the process of ‘salvific causation’ to operate. It is ultimately superseded by direct knowledge and vision. However, in the case of the ‘blind wanderers’ all they have is a faith that is unfounded in knowledge or vision.

The theme of inferior or unfounded knowledge is repeated in the *Cūlasakuludāyi Sutta*⁷⁰². Here, the wanderer Sakuludāyin again speaks to the Buddha about his encounter with Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta, the Jain. He explains that Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta claimed to have ‘complete knowledge and vision’, consistently omniscient and all-seeing. However, when Sakuludāyin asked him a question concerning the past, Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta was apparently thrown: “he prevaricated, led the talk aside, and showed anger, hate and bitterness.”⁷⁰³ Here, then, just as in the *Mahāsakuludāyi Sutta*, Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta’s claims to have the qualities of a great teacher are shown to be empty, to fail to stand up to investigation.

The Buddha, however, when asked the same questions about the past by Sakuludāyin also declines to answer; not, he explains, because he is unable to, but

⁷⁰⁰M i 512; Bhikkhu Bodhi 616.

⁷⁰¹Ibid.

⁷⁰²M ii 29-39; Bhikkhu Bodhi 654-662.

⁷⁰³M ii 31; Bhikkhu Bodhi 655.

simply because it would not be conducive to Sakuludāyin's development or welfare. "But let be the past, Udāyin, let be the future. I shall teach you the Dhamma."⁷⁰⁴

The Buddha then questions Udāyin about his own teachers' doctrine. Udāyin's reply is vague and tautologous — he explains that his teachers say: "'This is the perfect splendour'"⁷⁰⁵ When the Buddha asks what they are referring to when they speak of the perfect splendour, Udāyin can only reply by restating the definition in different terms: "'That splendour is the perfect splendour which is unsurpassed by any other splendour higher or more sublime.'" The Buddha responds that this process of circular definition could go on for a long time. He likens Udāyin and his teachers to a man who claims to be in love with the most beautiful woman in the country without knowing her or seeing her, without even knowing what she looks like. Just as such a man's talk 'turns out to be nonsense', so is with the claim that 'this is the perfect splendour' without even knowing what that splendour is.

When the Buddha continues the critique of Udāyin's position, he points out that furthermore, Udāyin has no experience of the many different types of splendour, so he is in no position to judge which is the highest. The Buddha talks Udāyin through examples of increasing splendour and brightness, beginning with the splendour of the light of a glow-worm, and ultimately progressing to the light of the sun at midday, and uses this to demonstrate Udāyin's foolishness:

"Beyond this, Udāyin, I know of very many gods [whose splendour] the radiance of the sun and moon does not match, yet I do not say that there is no other splendour higher or more sublime than that splendour. But you, Udāyin, say of that splendour which is lower and meaner than a glow-worms: 'This is the perfect splendour', yet you do not indicate what that splendour is."⁷⁰⁶

There are two counts here on which the Buddha criticises the teaching advocated by Udāyin. Firstly, the fact that Udāyin is unable to fully explain his claims when questioned demonstrates that they are not grounded in personal knowledge and experience, which, as we have seen, are key criteria for truth in the Buddha's teaching. Udāyin is thus making a claim which does not stand up to investigation. Secondly, the Buddha is able to see what Udāyin and his teachers cannot. The implication in the Buddha's rebuke that Udāyin praises as the perfect splendour that which is 'lower and meaner than a glow-worm's' suggests that the Buddha is able to see what their claims refer to even though they themselves are unclear about it. Not only this, but having seen with his superior knowledge and insight many greater forms of splendour, the

⁷⁰⁴M ii 32; Bhikkhu Bodhi 655.

⁷⁰⁵M ii 33; Bhikkhu Bodhi 656.

⁷⁰⁶M ii 35; Bhikkhu Bodhi 657.

Buddha can see that the object of Udāyin's praise is not worthy of being worshipped. Udāyin's ignorance, then, is shown on two levels — firstly, because he cannot justify or support his claims, and secondly because he is making claims that he is not qualified to make, for he is coming from a position of blindness. There is a certain arrogance — audacity even — implied in making claims that even the Buddha does not make, whilst having only a fraction of the Buddha's knowledge. Udāyin is duly chastened, however, by the Buddha's criticisms and concedes that 'The Buddha has terminated the discussion' because "on being pressed and questioned and cross-questioned about our own teacher's doctrine by the Blessed One, we are found empty, hollow and mistaken."⁷⁰⁷

The remaining passages of the *Cūḷasakuludāyī Sutta* are also interesting, because they turn to some common ground between the beliefs and values held by Udāyin's teachers and the Buddha. Udāyin explains that his teachers claim that 'There is an entirely pleasant world; there is practical way to realise an entirely pleasant world.'⁷⁰⁸ This is a claim that is also made by the Buddha later in the Sutta⁷⁰⁹. However, there is a fundamental difference between Udāyin's view and the Buddha's teaching about what this entirely pleasant world consists of, and the 'practical way to attain it'. Udāyin and his teachers believe that an entirely pleasant world is attained by skilful conduct — interestingly, this is explained in terms of the five precepts, demonstrating definite common ground with the Buddha over what constitutes ethical action. An alternative to practising this method of keeping the five precepts is to undertake and practise "some kind of asceticism."⁷¹⁰

The Buddha's criticism of this path is basically that it does not go far enough, and does not lead one to the cessation of suffering. He elicits from Udāyin a recognition that, even if one were to keep the five precepts or practise a form of asceticism, then one would still feel "both pleasure and pain", and not exclusively pleasure. Udāyin admits that one cannot realise an "entirely pleasant world" by "following a way of mixed pleasure and pain", and once again concedes that his teachers' doctrine has been shown to be "empty, hollow and mistaken" in the face of the Buddha's questioning. The Buddha then gives his account of an "entirely pleasant world", and the path to realise it. This description begins where Udāyin's left off; when a monk is "secluded from" sensual pleasures and unwholesome states, it is then that he can progress through the first three *jhānas*, which the Buddha identifies as the way to realise the entirely pleasant world. The "entirely pleasant world" is identified as the attainment of the fourth *jhāna*:

⁷⁰⁷M ii 36; Bhikkhu Bodhi 659.

⁷⁰⁸Ibid.

⁷⁰⁹M ii 37; Bhikkhu Bodhi 659.

⁷¹⁰M ii 36; Bhikkhu Bodhi 658.

“With the abandoning of pleasure and pain, and with the previous disappearance of joy and grief, a bhikkhu enters and abides in the fourth jhāna, which has neither-pain-nor-pleasure and purity of mindfulness due to equanimity. He dwells with those deities who have arisen in an entirely pleasant world and he talks with them and enters into conversation with them. It is at this point that an entirely pleasant world has been realised.”⁷¹¹

The division here between the first three jhānas as “only the way” to the realisation of an entirely pleasant world, and the fourth jhāna as its attainment is significant. Udāyin’s teachers are thrown into confusion at the point when the Buddha describes the way as the first three jhānas: “When this was said, the wanderer Sakuludāyin’s assembly made an uproar, saying very loudly and noisily: ‘We are lost along with our own teachers’ doctrines! We are lost along with our own teachers’ doctrines! We know nothing higher than that!’”⁷¹² As Bhikkhu Bodhi explains, the meaning of this is elucidated in the commentary: originally, meditators were able to attain the third jhāna, but as time went on, lost the ability to do so. Thus the current wanderers only know of this world second-hand, and have no experience of anything beyond that: “The wanderers only learned that ‘an entirely pleasant world’ exists and that the five qualities mentioned ...were the ‘practical way’ to it. They knew of no entirely pleasant world higher than the third jhāna, and of no practical way higher than the five qualities.”⁷¹³

Once again, then, the Buddha’s teaching is shown to be far more efficacious in reaching states of attainment than others. Just like the previous wanderers of other sects that the Buddha encountered, Udāyin’s teachers have incomplete knowledge, are acting on hearsay and authority without knowing the way to ‘an entirely pleasant world’ through their own direct experience. Even what their predecessors *did* know, however, is incomplete compared to the knowledge of the Buddha, for they never attained a state beyond the third jhāna. Furthermore, the Buddha goes on to distance himself from the teachers of Sakuludāyin on the grounds of motivation too. For them, a realisation of an ‘entirely pleasant world’ is the ultimate attainment of the holy life. The Buddha, however, describes this as a mere stage in the process, for “‘there are other states, ...higher and more sublime [than that] and it is for the sake of realising them that bhikkhus lead the holy life under me.’”⁷¹⁴ He then goes on to describe these states using the formula of the gradual path, beginning with the description of the arrival of a Tathāgatha in the world through to the attainment of the four jhānas. After

⁷¹¹M ii 37; Bhikkhu Bodhi 660.

⁷¹²M ii 37; Bhikkhu Bodhi 659.

⁷¹³Bhikkhu Bodhi, footnote 784, *Discourse on the Fruits of Reclusership*, p.124-5

⁷¹⁴M ii 37; Bhikkhu Bodhi 660.

this, with a mind “purified, bright, unblemished, rid of imperfection, malleable, wieldy, steady, and attained to imperturbability”⁷¹⁵, the disciple recollects past lives, and with “the divine eye”, sees the passing away and the arising of beings according to their kamma. Finally, he knows that the taints (*āsavas*) are destroyed, and attains knowledge of the destruction of suffering, thus liberating his mind. Each attainment after the fourth jhāna is described by the Buddha as one of the ‘higher and more sublime states’ for which the holy life is lived under his instruction.

Sakuludāyin and his teachers, then, are portrayed as inferior to the Buddha on many counts; their claims are not grounded in personal experience, such that they cannot explain or justify their beliefs with any degree of certainty; they have very limited insight, which is far exceeded by the Buddha, yet they continue to make claims about the way to liberation; even were one to attain the pinnacle of achievement according to their system, one would not have attained the cessation of suffering, but would simply have reached a certain stage in the path thereto. Compared to the Buddha’s teaching, then, their system is incomplete.

This message is reinforced by certain sections of the *Mahāvagga* of the *Saṃyutta Nikāya* where the Buddha’s disciples report their meetings with other wanderers. The first such account involves some disciples of the Buddha deciding to visit a group of wanderers who hold other views. These wanderers claim to teach the same teachings as the Buddha: “We also thus teach doctrine to our disciples, saying ‘Come ye, friends! Abandoning the five hindrances, the taints of the heart which cause weakening of insight, do ye cultivate the seven limbs of wisdom.’”⁷¹⁶ They then approach the Buddha’s disciples with a question: “What is the distinction, what the peculiarity of, what is the difference between Gotama the recluse’s teaching of doctrine and our teaching, between his instruction and our instruction.”⁷¹⁷ The Buddha’s disciples do not respond, but go and seek the Buddha to ask how they should answer the question. The Buddha tells them that they should ask the other wanderers how the five hindrances become ten, and how the seven limbs of wisdom are fourteen. The answer to this question is that three hindrances, sense-desire, aversion, and doubt, can be both within the self and outside it, whilst the single hindrance of laziness and sleepiness can be seen as two hindrances, as can excitement and depression. When considered in this way, the five hindrances are ten. The seven limbs of wisdom are mindfulness, discrimination of dhamma, equipoise, joy, concentration, tranquillity and strength. Mindfulness, discrimination and equipoise can be referred to both internal and external objects, thus each one becomes a pair. Joy and consciousness become

⁷¹⁵M ii 38; Bhikkhu Bodhi 661.

⁷¹⁶S v 108; Woodward 91.

⁷¹⁷Ibid.

pairs when it is understood that they can be both associated with and dissociated from initial and sustained thinking. Tranquillity and strength can both be applied to the body and the mind. In this way, the seven limbs become fourteen. The Buddha explains that other wanderers will not be able to answer this question, because they do not have sufficient insight. His words are worth quoting in some length, for they provide a clear example of a claim to supremacy over other groups:

“When questioned as to this, monks, the Wanderers of other views will be unable to explain themselves, and further will come to an ill pass. Why so? Because, monks, it is beyond their scope. For I behold not, monks, anyone in the world, with its devas and its Māras, its Brahmās, with its host of recluses and brahmins, with its devas and mankind, who could satisfy the mind with an answer to these questions, save only a Tathāgatha or a Tathāgatha’s disciples, or at any rate after hearing it of them.”⁷¹⁸

This is followed by two more instances where the Buddha’s teaching is compared favourably with apparently similar ones espoused by other wanderers. The second occurrence is a further way of supporting the Buddha’s superior knowledge about the seven limbs of wisdom. He explains that other teachers would not be able to explain which limbs of wisdom should be cultivated when the mind is sluggish, and which should be cultivated when the mind is excited.⁷¹⁹ The Buddha and his disciples are the only ones who know the answer to this question. In the third instance, other wanderers claim to teach the abandoning of the hindrances and the development of the four freedoms of mind, namely loving kindness (*mettā*), sympathetic joy (*muditā*), compassion (*karuṇā*) and equanimity (*upekkhā*). These things are also taught by the Buddha. However, the Buddha explains that no other teachers would be able to explain how these factors are developed, what their outcome is, their perfection, their fruit, and their conclusion.⁷²⁰ Gethin remarks that one of the significant things about these passages is that they demonstrate the Buddha’s apparent acceptance that there are some teachings that resemble his own — he does not flatly deny their teachings:

“It is surely striking that in none of the three cases is the Buddha represented as categorically denying the wanderers’ claim to a teaching that bears some similarity to his own ... In other words, the Nikāyas seem to accept some form of basic common ground between the Buddha and the wanderers.”⁷²¹

The superiority of the Buddha’s teaching is not maintained by a complete denial of the teachings of others; rather, it is seen as the teaching in its uniquely full development

⁷¹⁸S v 109; Woodward 92.

⁷¹⁹S v 112-5; Woodward 95-8.

⁷²⁰S v 115. The different factors are listed on pp. 115-121; Woodward 95-8.

⁷²¹Gethin, *The Buddhist Path to Awakening*, p. 180.

“The wanderers of other schools may abandon the *nīvaraṇas* and develop the seven *bojjhangas*, but the full potential inherent in this practice is not understood or fulfilled by them. In short, they do not really understand what they are doing.”⁷²²

We have already seen that the path put forward by the Buddha can be understood as a ‘natural law’ that operates in reality independent of any teaching about it. It is important to notice that, in the suttas we have looked at, the *jhānas*, the hindrances, the seven factors of awakening, and the four freedoms of mind are mentioned in the context of other schools, and teachings. This reinforces the fact that the law of ‘salvific causality’ operates universally — it is not the exclusive property of the Buddha’s ‘school’, but the same ‘spiritual landmarks’ operate for everybody, given the right causes and conditions. The implication of the *Cūḷasakuludāyī Sutta*, though, is that Sakuludāyīn and his group of wanderers are locked into a state of ignorance, and will not be able to progress to the cessation of suffering as long as they stay within that teaching. A clear message of the superiority and greater efficacy of the Buddha’s teaching runs through this sutta. The same message runs through the extracts from the *Mahāvagga*. This raises some important questions: even though the causality of salvation is in principle open to everybody, because it is ‘objectively’ the case, is it only followers of the Buddha who have the right ‘directions’ or instructions to realise it?

Mahāvagga

In the *Vekhanassa Sutta*⁷²³, the wanderer called Kaccāna Vekhanassa has similar views to Udāyīn about the ‘perfect splendour’, and is unable to explain his beliefs in much the same way. The Buddha again points this out, and then explains the five cords of sensual pleasure (corresponding to the senses) to Vekhanassa and explains how there are further pleasures that transcend these. When Vekhanassa marvels at the Buddha’s teachings about the ‘higher pleasures’, the Buddha explains how the wanderer is very disadvantaged by following a different teaching:

“Kaccāna, for you who are of another view, who accept another teaching, who approve of another teaching, who pursue a different training, who follow a different teacher, it is hard to know what sensuality is, or what sensual pleasure is, or what the pleasure higher than the sensual is. But those bhikkhus who are arahants with taints destroyed, who have lived the holy life, done what had to be done, laid down the burden, reached the true goal, destroyed the fetters of being, and are completely liberated through

⁷²²Ibid.

⁷²³M ii 40-44; Bhikkhu Bodhi 663-665.

final knowledge — it is they who would know what sensuality is ... what the pleasure higher than the sensual is.”⁷²⁴

This passage is very significant, for it suggests that other teachings obscure truth from a disciple, and prevent them from seeing clearly with insight. I wish to suggest that there are two ways of interpreting the Buddha’s claim that is hard for those from other teachings to know what sensuality is. Firstly, it could be understood that they do know what these things are in that they do not understand it in terms of the Buddhist rubric. This would correspond to Collins’s interpretation of right view as ‘acquaintance with Buddhist doctrine’⁷²⁵. Secondly, the passage can be taken at face value to mean that it is simply difficult for others to see the way things really are when their insight is obscured by wrong views and practices. In the first interpretation, truth is inextricably linked with — in a sense, a product of — ‘Buddhist rubric’, the Buddha’s vision of the world. In the second, the truth is there irrespective of the Buddha’s teaching, but this teaching simply facilitates its realisation.

Followers of Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta.

In the following section I will consider some of the suttas in which the Buddha encounters Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta or his followers. Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta is identified with Mahāvīra (‘Great Hero’), who founded Jainism. Harvey summarises the teachings of the Jains as follows:

“All things, even stones, are alive, each containing a *jīva* or ‘life principle’... The aim of Jainism is to liberate the *jīva* from the round of rebirths by freeing it from its encrustation of karma, seen as a kind of subtle matter. The methods of doing so are primarily wearing out the results of previous karma by austerities such as fasting, going unwashed, and pulling out the hair, and also, to avoid the generation of new karma, self-restraint, total non-violence ... to any form of life, and vegetarianism.”⁷²⁶

The Buddha has many encounters with the Nigaṇṭhas, and reserves some of his harshest criticism for them. One of the most detailed accounts of such an encounter is found in the *Devadaha Sutta*⁷²⁷. In it, the Buddha visits a town called Devadaha and tells his followers about the teachings of Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta. He characterises these teachings as follows:

“Whatever this person feels, whether pleasure or pain or neither pain-nor-pleasure, all that is caused by what was done in the past. So by annihilating

⁷²⁴M ii 43; Bhikkhu Bodhi 664.

⁷²⁵Collins, *Selfless Persons*, pp.89-90.

⁷²⁶Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.13

⁷²⁷M ii 214-228; Bhikkhu Bodhi 827-838.

with asceticism past actions and by doing no fresh actions, there will be no consequences in the future. With no consequences in the future, there is the destruction of action. With the destruction of action, there is the destruction of suffering. With the destruction of suffering, there is the destruction of feeling. With the destruction of feeling, all suffering will be exhausted.' So speak the Nigaṇṭhas, bhikkhus.'"728

The Buddha explains that in response to this teaching, he asks the Nigaṇṭhas whether they *know* that they existed in the past. They reply that they do not know. They also admit that they do not know how much suffering has been exhausted and how much more that there is to work off; nor do they know "what the abandoning of unwholesome states is and what the cultivation of wholesome states is here and now."729 This being the case, the Buddha argues that it is "not fitting" for the Nigaṇṭhas to make the claims that they do. If they knew about their past existences, or about the amount of suffering they had to work off, then their claims would be plausible; as it is, they are grounded in ignorance and this is what makes them 'not fitting'.

The Nigaṇṭhas response is that their teacher, Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta, "is omniscient and all-seeing and claims to have complete knowledge and vision."730 It is as a result of his omniscience that he teaches about past lives and how to cease suffering through asceticism. The Buddha's response refers once more to the unreliability of Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta's knowledge. He mentions the 'five things that may turn out in two different ways here and now', namely, "faith, approval, oral tradition, reasoned cogitation, and reflective acceptance of a view."731 The Buddha asks the Nigaṇṭhas what kind of faith, approval etc. they have "in a teacher who speaks about the past.", and explains that "I did not see any legitimate defence of their position by the Nigaṇṭhas."732 As we have seen, the Buddha's criticism of Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta is that he makes claims about things in the past that he does not actually know about. The above question and the response from the Nigaṇṭhas reinforces this criticism — the Nigaṇṭhas are unable to find any 'legitimate defence' for Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta's position through any means of knowledge, simply because he has no justification for his knowledge. His position is grounded in ignorance.

As the sutta progresses, the Buddha embarks upon a fresh line of criticism. He gets the Nigaṇṭhas to admit that the causal result of undergoing "intense exertion" is

⁷²⁸M ii 214; Bhikkhu Bodhi 827.

⁷²⁹M ii 215; Bhikkhu Bodhi 828. A similar line of criticism is found in M i 94; Bhikkhu Bodhi 188.

⁷³⁰M ii 218; Bhikkhu Bodhi 829.

⁷³¹Ibid.

⁷³²M ii 220; Bhikkhu Bodhi 831.

“painful, racking, piercing feelings”, feelings which are absent when the exertion stops. This example proves that suffering can be a direct result of one’s own actions in the present, rather than a consequence of actions in past lives:

“You are therefore feeling only the painful, racking, piercing feelings of your self-imposed exertion, and it is through ignorance, unknowing and delusion that you mistakenly hold: ‘Whatever this person feels ...all suffering will be exhausted’.”⁷³³

The Buddha then gets Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta to acknowledge various other flaws in his beliefs; for example, he admits that the painful fruits of an action cannot be transformed into a pleasant fruit, however hard one exerts oneself and strives to change it. The basic admission that the Buddha elicits from Nigaṇṭhas Nātaputta is that the causal connection between an action and its result cannot be altered, however much one strives. The Buddha points out that this admission undermines Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta’s teaching and the practices of his followers: “That being so, the venerable Nigaṇṭhas’ exertion is fruitless, their striving is fruitless.”⁷³⁴

So far, then, we have seen a number of grounds on which the Buddha criticises the Nigaṇṭhas. Firstly, they are unable to verify their own claims about how much suffering there is to work off, and how much more they have to do. Secondly, they claim authority for their beliefs by referring to Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta’s omniscience, which is disproved by the Buddha. Thirdly, their beliefs are falsified by reality – contrary to the claims of the Nigaṇṭhas, painful feelings can be the result of one’s own present actions, rather than those of past lives, and the consequences of actions cannot be changed, however much one wills it.

Having criticised the Nigaṇṭhas in this way, the Buddha changes his approach. He explains that there are ‘ten legitimate deductions’ to be made from the Nigaṇṭhas’ assertions. It is not necessary to list all these in detail, but will suffice to look at some examples. In his first ‘legitimate deduction’, the Buddha explains that if pleasure and pain were caused by actions in the past, then the Nigaṇṭhas must have behaved very badly: “the Nigaṇṭhas surely must have done bad deeds in the past, since they now feel such painful, racking, piercing feelings.” The Buddha’s next deduction contains an implicit critique of theism:

“If the pleasure and pain that beings feel are caused by the creative act of a supreme God (*issaranimāṇahetu*), then the Nigaṇṭhas surely must have

⁷³³M ii 219-20; Bhikkhu Bodhi 830-31.

⁷³⁴M ii 221-2; Bhikkhu Bodhi 832.

been created by an evil Supreme God, since they now feel such painful, racking feelings.”⁷³⁵

Similarly, if pleasure and pain are caused by chance, the Nigaṇṭhas must have very bad luck, and if class of birth is a cause of pleasure and pain, then “the Nigaṇṭhas surely must belong to a bad class”. If pleasure and pain are caused by ‘exertion here and now’, then the Nigaṇṭhas must be ‘striving very badly’ because they experience such painful, unpleasant feelings.

The Buddha claims that the Nigaṇṭhas ‘are to be censured’ if any of these theories are true, and censured if they are not. For example, if the theory about pleasure and pain being caused by a creative act of God is true, then the Nigaṇṭhas are to be censured for they must have behaved very badly to warrant such pain. If this is not the case, then the Nigaṇṭhas are still to be censured for all the reasons the Buddha has already highlighted. The same is true for all the other proposed causes of pleasure and pain — the fact that the Nigaṇṭhas experience unpleasant, painful feelings (in their ascetic practices) suggests that, on these accounts, they have acted badly to ‘deserve’ such painful feelings. Even if none of these theories about the origin of pleasure and pain is true, according to the Buddha the Nigaṇṭhas still follow futile practices which are grounded in ignorance, and are to be censured for this.

The point of this last line of criticism through the ‘ten legitimate deductions’ is that, even were some model admitted that supported the Nigaṇṭhas’ view about the past origin of present feelings, there would still be many reasons for criticising them. Not only are their theories wrong, but their conduct is reprehensible. Their exertion and striving is ‘fruitless’.

Following this thoroughgoing criticism of the Nigaṇṭhas, the Buddha forwards his idea of how exertion and striving are ‘fruitful’. A bhikkhu, he explains, should not be overwhelmed by suffering, and should not “give up the pleasure that accords with Dhamma”, although he should not become ‘infatuated’ with this pleasure.⁷³⁶ Unlike the Nigaṇṭhas, the bhikkhu understands the causal relation between his actions and the diminishing of suffering:

“He knows thus: ‘When I strive with determination, this particular source of suffering fades away in me because of that determined striving; and when I look on with equanimity, this particular source of suffering fades away in me while I develop equanimity.’”⁷³⁷

Realising this, the bhikkhu keeps striving with equanimity, until ‘suffering is exhausted in him’.

⁷³⁵M ii 222; Bhikkhu Bodhi 833.

⁷³⁶M ii 223; Bhikkhu Bodhi 833-4.

⁷³⁷M ii 223; Bhikkhu Bodhi 834.

Interestingly, in the next stage of his explanation, the Buddha describes how it is sometimes necessary to engage in practice which is painful and unpleasurable. However, such practices are to serve a certain purpose, and once this is achieved, then the monk can finish the practice. The Buddha explains how a monk might think to himself: “While I live according to my pleasure, unwholesome states increase in me and wholesome states diminish; but when I exert myself in what is painful, unwholesome states diminish in me and wholesome states increase.”⁷³⁸ Thinking this, the monk carries out the painful practice, but only until he has achieved the purpose of diminishing unwholesome states. Later, the Buddha explains, the monk stops the practice of what is painful. In this description, then, the Buddha demonstrates that he does not disapprove of all painful ascetic practices *per se*, for they can have a useful purpose. What he objects to in the case of the Nigaṇṭhas is that there is no apparent reason for their painful practices — they are grounded in ignorance and their striving is futile. In contrast, the monk who follows the Buddha’s teaching has the wisdom to identify when such practices are useful, and when they are not. As a result, “the exertion is fruitful, the striving is fruitful.”⁷³⁹

The Buddha completes his description of the right way to practise by the stock explanation of the gradual path, beginning with the perfection of the precepts and going on through the attainment of the hindrances to the attainment of liberating insight. We saw earlier in the sutta how the Buddha found ten grounds on which the Nigaṇṭhas could be censured. Whatever the theory of the provenance of painful actions, the fact that the Nigaṇṭhas experienced them suggested they acted poorly, either in the past or the present. The Buddha applies the same ten points to his own practice. Consider, for example, the first point: “If the pleasure and pain that beings feel are caused by what was done in the past, the Tathāgatha surely must have done good deeds in the past, since he now feels such taintless pleasant feelings.”⁷⁴⁰ On the issue of a ‘creator God’ causing pleasure and pain, it is said that ‘the Tathāgatha must surely have been created by a good Supreme God’. The list continues, substituting positive points where there were negative points for the Nigaṇṭhas. Whether such accounts of the causes of suffering are true or not true, the Buddha explains that the Tathāgatha “is to be praised”. If any of the accounts are true, he is to be praised because they indicate that he is accomplished in good conduct, and irrespective of this fact, he is to be praised because, unlike the Nigaṇṭhas, his actions are grounded in knowledge and are consequently ‘fruitful’.

⁷³⁸M ii 225; Bhikkhu Bodhi 835.

⁷³⁹M ii 226; Bhikkhu Bodhi 836.

⁷⁴⁰M ii 227; Bhikkhu Bodhi 837.

To sum up, this sutta has many purposes. Firstly, it demonstrates the importance of grounding practice in genuine knowledge, and shows the futility of practices which are grounded in ignorance. The Nigaṇṭhas provide a vehicle through which the Buddha can convey this point. Secondly, the sutta demonstrates the success of the Buddha's teaching, because it is grounded in knowledge and is thus fruitful.

The Upāli Sutta

The Upāli Sutta provides another lengthy account of the Buddha's encounters with the Nigaṇṭhas teachings, although it focuses on an entirely different aspect of their beliefs. The Sutta relates how a follower of Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta, Dīgha Tapassī ('Tall Ascetic') comes across the Buddha, and is questioned by the Buddha about his views, namely the different kinds of action that can perpetrate evil. Dīgha Tapassī replies that, rather than using the word 'action', the Nigaṇṭhas use the word 'rod' (*daṇḍa*). The three 'rods' for the 'performance' and 'perpetration' of evil action are the bodily rod, the verbal rod, and the mental rod. In the footnote to this translation, Bhikkhu Bodhi explains that the term *daṇḍa* has the implication of 'rod' as an instrument of punishment, and argues that this is a reflection of the Nigaṇṭhas' views: "the idea seems to be suggested that the Jains regarded bodily, verbal, and mental activity as instruments by which the individual torments himself by prolonging his bondage in saṃsāra and torments others by causing them harm."⁷⁴¹

Of these three 'rods', we are told that Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta considers the bodily rod as "the most reprehensible for the performance of evil action."⁷⁴²

The Buddha then explains how he teaches that there are three kinds of action, the bodily, physical and mental, and that of these the mental is the most 'reprehensible for the performance of evil action.' Dīgha Tapassī goes back to Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta and his followers and relates this encounter with the Buddha. Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta strongly disagrees with the Buddha's teaching: "'What does the trivial mental rod count for in comparison with the gross bodily rod?'"⁷⁴³ This point is taken up by Upāli, a lay follower of Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta, who boasts that he will go to see the Buddha and easily refute his teachings: "'Just as a strong man might seize a long-haired ram by the hair and drag him to and drag him fro and drag him round about, so in debate I will drag the recluse Gotama to and drag him fro and drag him round about.'"⁷⁴⁴

Upāli duly goes to the Buddha to argue his case and demonstrate the superiority of Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta's teachings. However, by asking Upāli a series of

⁷⁴¹Bhikkhu Bodhi, fn. 579, p. 1255.

⁷⁴²M i 373; Bhikkhu Bodhi 478.

⁷⁴³M i 374; Bhikkhu Bodhi 479.

⁷⁴⁴M i 374; Bhikkhu Bodhi 480.

questions, the Buddha quickly leads Upāli to make a series of self-refuting and self-contradictory statements that expose the weakness of his position, and the superiority of the Buddha's own. For example, the Buddha raises the hypothetical case of a man whose actions are thoroughly restrained, but who, in the process of moving around, inadvertently "brings about the destruction of many small living beings." Upāli reports that, according to Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta's teaching, this destruction is not "reprehensible" because it is "not willed". However, if it is willed, it is "greatly reprehensible". The Buddha points out that, since 'willing' is part of the 'mental' rod, and that willing makes the difference between a great-reprehensible and non-reprehensible action, Upāli's claims about the relative insignificance of the mental rod is refuted: "Householder, householder, pay attention to how you reply! What you said before does not agree with what you said afterwards, nor does what you said afterwards agree with what you said before."⁷⁴⁵ As the Buddha continues to ask questions of Upāli, more and more inconsistencies in his position are uncovered, until Upāli admits that he is satisfied with the Buddha's arguments, and asks to go for refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha. In response, the Buddha tells Upāli that he must 'investigate thoroughly' the Dhamma. Upāli's response to this is very favourable: "I am even more satisfied and pleased with the Blessed One for telling me that. For the other sectarians, on acquiring me as their disciple, would carry a banner announcing: 'The householder Upāli has come to discipleship under us.'"⁷⁴⁶

The Buddha's next statement serves to underline his lack of sectarianism, for he counsels Upāli to show some loyalty to the Nigaṇṭhas whom he has supported for so long: "Householder, your family has long supported the Nigaṇṭhas and you should consider that alms should be given to them when they come'." Once again, Upāli is impressed with the Buddha, and goes for refuge for a third time, upon which the Buddha gives Upāli 'progressive instruction' through the gradual path to liberation. In Chapter Four we saw the Buddha's emphasis on knowing for oneself that the four noble truths, for example, are true. This is supported in this sutta, by the Buddha's insistence that Upāli 'investigate thoroughly' rather than just accepting the Buddha's teachings without testing them. This approach is reinforced in the description of Upāli's liberation. When Upāli has transcended the five hindrances we are told that "the spotless immaculate vision of the Dhamma arose in him: 'All that is subject to arising is subject to cessation.'"⁷⁴⁷ It is significant that Upāli is expressly said to be independent of any others in this knowledge — he knows it and sees it for himself.

⁷⁴⁵M i 376; Bhikkhu Bodhi 482.

⁷⁴⁶M i 379; Bhikkhu Bodhi 484.

⁷⁴⁷M i 380; Bhikkhu Bodhi 485.

“the householder Upāli saw the Dhamma, attained the Dhamma, understood the Dhamma, fathomed the Dhamma; he crossed beyond doubt, did away with perplexity, gained intrepidity, and became independent of others in the Teacher’s Dispensation.”⁷⁴⁸

The rest of the Upāli Sutta is dedicated to describing Upāli’s return to Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta to tell him about his ‘conversion’ to the Buddha’s teaching. Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta reacts angrily, abusing Upāli and telling him he has “come back all caught up in a vast net of doctrine”, and that he has been subject to the Buddha’s “converting magic”⁷⁴⁹. Upāli is quite unashamed in his response, describing the Buddha’s ‘converting magic’ as “auspicious” and “good”: “If the world with its gods, Māras, and its Brahmās, this generation with its recluses and brahmins, its princes and its people, were to be converted by this conversion, it would lead to the welfare and happiness of the world for a long time.”⁷⁵⁰

Using various similes, Upāli describes the difference between Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta’s teaching and the Buddha’s:

“the doctrine of the foolish Nigaṇṭhas will give delight to fools but not to the wise, and it will not withstand testing or being smoothened out...The doctrine of that Blessed One, accomplished and fully enlightened, will give delight to the wise but not to fools, and it will withstand testing and being smoothened out.”

When Upāli continues to praise the Buddha and his teaching, we are told in graphic terms that Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta is so sickened that he vomits blood: “since Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta was unable to bear this honour done to the Blessed One, hot blood then and there gushed from his mouth.”⁷⁵¹ The commentary explains that this is the beginning of an illness from which Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta never recovers, which is further symbolic of the superiority of the Buddha’s teaching over Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta’s.

Yet again, this sutta serves to reinforce the knowledge and wisdom of the Buddha, and contrasts it with the ignorance and foolishness of other teachers. It demonstrates how beliefs that are not grounded in knowledge and insight are shown up not only on the grounds of the conduct that accompanies them, but also because they do not make sense and are impossible to defend.

⁷⁴⁸Ibid.

⁷⁴⁹M i 383; Bhikkhu Bodhi 488.

⁷⁵⁰M i 384; Bhikkhu Bodhi 488.

⁷⁵¹M i 387; Bhikkhu Bodhi 492.

In the *Dīgha Nikāya*, the *Pāsādika Sutta* contains an account of the behaviour of the Nigaṇṭhas after the death of Nātaputta⁷⁵². We learn that they are in conflict with each other, having split into two factions, and are “quarrelling and disputing, fighting and attacking each other with wordy warfare”⁷⁵³. When the Buddha learns of this conduct he blames it on the fact that Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta was not fully enlightened, and thus his teachings were unhelpful and grounded in ignorance:

“here is a doctrine and discipline that is ill-proclaimed, unedifyingly displayed and ineffectual in calming the passions because its proclaimer was not fully enlightened. Such being the case, ... a disciple cannot live according to that doctrine and maintain proper conduct, nor live by it, but deviates from it.”⁷⁵⁴

This is contrasted to the Buddha’s own teachings, which are effectual in calming the passions, because the Buddha is fully enlightened. The Buddha argues that there is ‘much demerit’ in practising the teachings of an unenlightened teacher, because they are so ineffectual. Conversely, there is much merit in following the teachings of the Buddha. Another way in which the Buddha’s teachings are contrasted with Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta’s is over what would happen to disciples of each group after the death of the teacher. In the case of Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta we already know that, on his death, his disciples split into factions and quarrelled and disputed with each other, throwing the order into disarray. In contrast, the Buddha describes the ideal state of affairs which he has put into practice:

“Suppose a Teacher has arisen in the world, an Arahant, fully-enlightened Buddha, and his doctrine is well-proclaimed ...effectual in calming the passions, and his disciples have fully mastered the true Dhamma, the full purity of the holy life has become clear and evident to them in the logic of its unfolding, and has been sufficiently grounded among them while being thus well-proclaimed among humans by the time of the Teacher’s passing from them. That way, the Teacher’s death would not be a sad thing for his disciples. Why? They would think: ‘Our Teacher arose in the world for us ...and we have fully mastered the true Dhamma ... while it was proclaimed among humans, and now our Teacher has passed away from among us.’ That way, the Teacher’s death would not be a sad thing for his disciples.”⁷⁵⁵

⁷⁵²Maurice Walshe points out that this presents a ‘chronological problem’, as Nigaṇṭha Nātaputta is thought to have died after the Buddha. Basham suggests that Makhali Gosāla may be meant in this sutta.

⁷⁵³D iii 117; Walshe 427..

⁷⁵⁴Diii 119; Walshe 428.

⁷⁵⁵D iii 122-3; Walshe 429-30.

Thus the teaching of the Nigaṇṭhas is portrayed as inferior to the Buddha's; it is not founded in knowledge of the way things are', and proponents are unable to defend the teachings in comparison to the greater coherence of the Buddha's teachings. The flawed nature of the Nigaṇṭhas' teaching is demonstrated in the lack of harmony and discipline amongst the followers, which is in complete contrast to the conduct of the Buddha's followers.

Brahmins

So far, then, we have examined various references to wandering ascetics that the Buddha encountered. As we saw in chapter two (pp. 81-4), another major 'religious' group in the Buddha's time was the brahmins, and this section will be devoted to considering some of the Buddha's encounters with them. Historically, the term 'brahmin' referred to followers of a religious group that arrived in India with the Aryans. Harvey summarises their spiritual goal as "attaining the heaven of the creator god Brahmā by means of truthfulness, study of the Vedic teachings, and either sacrifice or austerities."⁷⁵⁶ As we shall see, the Buddha is more accepting of the brahmins than of the wandering ascetics, and does not censure them quite so vigorously.

One of the main sources of suttas detailing the Buddha's encounters with brahmins is the *Brāhmaṇavagga* of the *Majjhima Nikāya*. We have already seen how the Buddha reacts in some encounters with Brahmins — for example, in the *Cankī Sutta* we saw the Buddha rejecting the young brahmin's dependence on the scriptures and oral tradition on the grounds that it is not grounded in personal experience. With very few exceptions, both in the *Brāhmaṇavagga* and elsewhere in the Nikāyas, the Buddha's treatment of brahmins is characterised by a rejection of their ritual practices as futile, and an emphasis on the importance of ethical conduct over rituals. In the first of these suttas, the *Brahmāyu Sutta*, a brahmin asks the Buddha how one is a brahmin, and the Buddha replies with a definition of an arahat:

"Who knows about his former lives, Sees heavens and states of deprivation, And has arrived at birth's destruction, A sage who knows by direct knowledge, Who knows his mind is purified, Entirely freed from every lust, Who has abandoned birth and death, Who is complete in the holy life, Who has transcended everything, One such as this is called a Brahmin."⁷⁵⁷

It is particularly interesting here that the Buddha uses the term 'brahmin' in application to the fulfilment of his own teaching, as though 'brahmin' is a generally accepted term for a 'spiritual teacher' rather than a sectarian labelling for one particular type of

⁷⁵⁶Peter Harvey, *An Introduction to Buddhism*, p. 11.

⁷⁵⁷M ii 144; Bhikkhu Bodhi 744-5.

religious adherent. The Buddha redefines, rather than replaces the term. This is illustrated in the *Mahā-Assapura Sutta*, where in reply to the question, “How is a bhikkhu a brahmin?”, the Buddha replies: “He has expelled evil unwholesome states that defile, bring renewal of being, give trouble, ripen in suffering, and lead to future birth, ageing and death.”⁷⁵⁸

A far more detailed account of the ideal qualities of a brahmin is found in the *Vāsetṭha Sutta* of the *Sutta-Nipāta* — having comprehensively listed the types of ethical qualities that distinguish a brahmin, the Buddha rejects the original, contemporary understanding of a brahmin as one who is *born* into such status. Such titles “are mere wordly conventions. They have come into being by common consent.”⁷⁵⁹ but they are not true: “No one is *born* a brahmin; no-one is born a non-brahmin. A brahmin is a brahmin because of what he *does*; a man who is not a brahmin is not a brahmin because of what he *does*.”. The Buddha then describes the “essence of Brahmin”: “A brahmin is a result of self-restraint, wholesome living and self-control.”⁷⁶⁰ Returning to the *Brāhmaṇavagga*, the same message against the caste system (into which people are believed to be born as brahmins) is found in the *Assalāyana Sutta*. The Buddha points out that like other castes, brahmins are born of women, not Brahminā, that the quality of their rebirths is conditional on their conduct, and that it is not only brahmins who can cultivate positive qualities such as *mettā*. He thus points out that the theory of the ‘uniqueness’ of brahmins does not stand up to questioning, that they have no evidence to support their position. This message is reinforced in the *Esukārī Sutta*, where the Buddha maintains that a person from any caste, however lowly, is able to follow the five precepts, and accomplish ‘the true way, the Dhamma that is wholesome’, and that true wealth is a persons ability to accomplish the Dhamma: “I, brahmin, declare the noble supramundane Dhamma as a person’s own wealth.”⁷⁶¹

The Buddha’s criticism of existing brahmins is that some of their beliefs are groundless, and irrelevant as far as the attainment of the Dhamma is concerned. We have already discussed that following the Dhamma is portrayed as behaving in accordance with ‘reality’, the way things really are. It is unsurprising then, that the points on which brahmins diverge from the teachings of the Buddha are described as false or grounded in ignorance. In an earlier section we already touched upon the *Subha Sutta*⁷⁶² in which the Buddha likens brahmins to a string of blind men trying in vain to lead each other, because they have no ‘direct knowledge’ with which to guide

⁷⁵⁸M i 280; Bhikkhu Bodhi 370.

⁷⁵⁹Sn 648; Saddhatissa 75.

⁷⁶⁰Sn 655; Saddhatissa 75.

⁷⁶¹M ii 181; Bhikkhu Bodhi 789.

⁷⁶²M ii 197- 207; Bhikkhu Bodhi 808-818.

themselves. They claim that five factors which provide merit are truth, asceticism, celibacy, study, and generosity, but none of them have direct knowledge that this is the case. The same criticism is made of the ‘brahmins of the three vedas’ in the *Tevijja Sutta*⁷⁶³ — they are making unfounded claims, based in ignorance. However, in the *Soṇadaṇḍa Sutta*⁷⁶⁴, the Buddha’s rejection of the brahmins of the three vedas is not complete, for he does condone some of the qualities that they value. These brahmins hold that one must possess five qualities in order to be a brahmin: one must be well-born, be well-versed in the mantras, be handsome and pleasing in appearance, be virtuous, and be learned and wise. The Buddha maintains that one could still be a brahmin without the first three qualities, but without wisdom or morality, one could never be called a brahmin: “Wisdom is purified by morality and morality is purified by wisdom.”⁷⁶⁵ Morality and wisdom are defined by the standard description of gradual development, beginning with the perfection of the five precepts before developing insight through meditation. The reason given for the irrelevance of the first three factors propounded by the brahmins is that they carry with them no ‘ethical’ demands. Having been convinced by the Buddha, Soṇandaṇḍa the brahmin explains the position to his fellow brahmins by using the example of his nephew, Angaka, who is well trained in all the five qualities:

“But if Angaka were to take life, take what is not given, commit adultery, tell lies and drink strong drink — what would good looks, or mantras, or birth profit him? But it is because a Brahmin is virtuous, ...wise, on account of these two points can he truthfully declare, ‘I am a Brahmin.’”⁷⁶⁶

In the *Aṅguttara Nikāya*, mention is made of the ‘three-fold lore of Brahmins’, namely that they be well-born, given to study, and ‘learned in idioms and grammar’, and it is contrasted with the ‘three-fold lore of the *ariyans*’, which is described as being aloof from evil states and in a state of *jhāna*; having insight of former births and other beings; attaining the destruction of the *āsavas* and release from them. There follows a rare example of a direct comparison between the brahmins and the noble disciples (*ariyasāvakas*): “He who has the three-fold lore of the brahmins is not worth one sixteenth part of him who hath it in the discipline of the Ariyan.”⁷⁶⁷ Elsewhere there is a reference to the rituals of Brahmins who believe in the purifying powers of water. No matter how many rituals they perform, they will still not gain purity so long as they have not got rid of the defilements of body (i.e. taking life etc.), speech (false speech ...) and mind (wrong view etc.):

⁷⁶³D i 235-252; Walshe 187-195.

⁷⁶⁴D i 111-126; 125-132.

⁷⁶⁵D i 124; Walshe 131.

⁷⁶⁶D i 123; Walshe 130-131.

⁷⁶⁷A i 163; Woodward 149.

“One characterised by these ten ways of action may rise up early and at eventide touch the earth ...worship fire or not ...bow to the sun or not ...descend in the evening into water for the third time or not, yet he is still impure. Why? Those ten ways of wrong action are impure and cause impurity.”⁷⁶⁸

Thus we have seen how the Brahmins are criticised for following practices which, through their ignorance, they fail to recognise as futile or irrelevant to the process of attaining liberation or purity. It is interesting, however, that the Buddha does not deny the goal to which they are aspiring — namely, union with Brahmā. Here it is useful to clarify what the concept of Brahmā would have meant in the Buddha’s time, and a helpful clarification is provided by Bhikkhu Bodhi in his introduction to the *Majjhima Nikāya*. In contemporary Hindu traditions, the term Brahman can have the meaning of “an impersonal absolute reality hidden behind and manifesting through the changing phenomena of the world.”⁷⁶⁹ Bhikkhu Bodhi emphasises that this concept of *brahma* never appears in the Pali Canon. Instead, the brahmins in the Pali canon understood Brahmā to be an eternal, personal creator god who regulates the processes of the world. Buddhists had their own conception of what Brahmā stood for:

“The Buddhists themselves asserted that Brahmā was not a single creator God but a collective name for several classes of high deities whose chiefs, forgetting that they are still transient beings in the grip of kamma, were prone to imagine themselves to be the omnipotent everlasting creator.”⁷⁷⁰

We have already seen that the Buddha admits the existence of Brahmā; indeed, it was Brahmā who exhorted the Buddha to teach the Dhamma after he had attained Enlightenment. It is not that the Brahmins’ aspirations are vain, but that they are not behaving in a way that gives them any hope of fulfilling these expectations.

In the Tevijja Sutta, two brahmins approach the Buddha, confused at the multifarious practices advocated by different Brahmins: “There are so many kinds of Brahmins who teach different paths ...do all these ways lead to union with Brahmā?” The Buddha replies that none of these paths do, because none of the teachers have ever had direct knowledge of Brahmā, and are therefore not in a position to guide others. He then reiterates the criticism of the ‘Threefold Lore’ of the Brahmins, arguing that those who follow this teaching are often “full of hate, ill-will, impure, undisciplined, encumbered with wives and wealth”⁷⁷¹, and thus have nothing whatever in common with Brahmā, who is the antithesis of these qualities. It is impossible for such individuals who “persistently neglect what a brahmin should do” to attain union

⁷⁶⁸A v 266; Woodward 180.

⁷⁶⁹Bhikkhu Bodhi, Introduction, p. 57.

⁷⁷⁰Ibid.

⁷⁷¹D i 248; Walshe 192-3.

with Brahmā; to expect them to do so is like expecting a man who is bound and chained to the shore to cross a strong-flowing river. In the same way, a brahmin who does not conduct himself skilfully is bound by the five strands of the sense desires, and unable to attain liberation in that state: “...those Brahmins learned in the Three Vedas are enslaved, infatuated by these five strands of sense desire, which they enjoy guiltily, unaware of danger, knowing no way out.”⁷⁷² Similarly, a brahmin who is beset by the five hindrances is likened to a man who wishes to cross the river, but lies down on the bank and falls asleep under a blanket — he, too, will never get across in this way.

However, the Buddha clearly understands that union with Brahmā is possible, for he claims to have direct knowledge of how to attain it. The problem for the brahmins is not only their practices and their neglect of skilful conduct, but, connected with this, they are unable to see what is wrong with their actions and how they should behave, because they do not have direct personal knowledge. The Buddha, in contrast, *does* have direct knowledge of the path to union with Brahmā: “For I know Brahmā and the world of Brahmā, and the way to the world of Brahmā, and the path of practice whereby the world of Brahmā may be gained.”⁷⁷³ The description of this path follows the first part of the ‘standard’ formula, in which a disciple goes forth and practices the moralities. When this disciple gains the first jhāna, he suffuses the world with loving kindness (*mettā*); then with compassion, sympathetic joy, and finally with equanimity. Such a monk is ‘unencumbered’ and is without hate and ill-will and is pure and disciplined, and thus has much in common with Brahmā:

“Then that an unencumbered monk, after death, at the breaking up of the body, should attain to union with unencumbered Brahmā — that is possible. Likewise a monk without hate ... without ill-will ..., pure ..., disciplined ... Then that a disciplined monk, after death, at the breaking up of the body, should attain to union with Brahmā — that is possible.”⁷⁷⁴

This is reminiscent of the *Cūḷasakuludāyī Sutta*⁷⁷⁵, where the Buddha explains that one can attain the lesser goal of a realisation of an ‘entirely pleasant world’ whilst on the way to the realisation of the cessation of suffering. The implication here is that followers of other teachers can be on the same path as followers of the Buddha, subject to the same factors of causation, but do not have the right guidance to go any further than a partial realisation. When addressing the teachings of Udāyin’s group, the Buddha described the first three jhānas as merely the way to the realisation of an ‘entirely pleasant world’. Udāyin’s group did not even have the ability to reach this stage of attainment, let alone progress beyond it to the cessation of suffering. What

⁷⁷²D i 245; Walshe 191

⁷⁷³D i 249; Walshe 193.

⁷⁷⁴D i 252; Walshe 195.

⁷⁷⁵M ii 31-39; Bhikkhu Bodhi 654-662.

they view as the ultimate goal is, according to the Buddha's teaching, merely a stage along the way to ultimate liberation. Similarly, the ultimate goal for the brahmins is identified with the first jhāna, which, according to the Buddha, is simply a preliminary stage along the path to liberation. Not only, then, do both groups have an inferior goal to the one described by the Buddha, but they do not even know how to attain that goal, and are caught up in unhelpful and irrelevant practices. The reason for this is that they do not have a guide who knows and sees the way things really are, but are blindly casting around in a state of ignorance. The Buddha, however, knows, sees and teaches the cessation of suffering, and the way to the cessation of suffering — in this respect he is unique and is unsurpassed in this knowledge.

At this point the *Tevijja Sutta* ends, begging the question why the Buddha did not teach the brahmins about the rest of the path to nibbāna, but stopped at the stage of the first jhāna. This question is addressed in the *Dhānañjāni Sutta* in the *Majjhima Nikāya*, where the monk Sāriputta teaches Dhānañjāni the brahmin how to arrive in the Brahmā-world. Knowing about this, the Buddha asks him: “Sāriputta, having established the brahmin ...in the inferior Brahma-world, why did you rise from your seat and leave while there was still more to be done?”⁷⁷⁶ Sāriputta's answer provides something of a weak justification: “I thought thus: ‘These brahmins are devoted to the Brahma-world. Suppose I show the brahmin Dhānañjāni the path to the company of Brahmā.’”⁷⁷⁷ The Buddha replies that Dhānañjāni has indeed reappeared in the Brahma-world. In his footnote to this section, Bhikkhu Bodhi suggests that the Buddha's questions to Sāriputta on this issue are intended as a gentle rebuke, because Dhānañjāni had the potential to progress further than the stage of the realisation of the Brahma-world, and go on to become a noble disciple. Bhikkhu Bodhi suggests that the Buddha himself only teaches brahmins the way to Brahmā⁷⁷⁸ when they do not have the potential to go any further than that.

The fact that the Buddha sees union with Brahmā as an inferior attainment is supported in the *Anguttara Nikāya*, where he addresses the beliefs that the best sight is Brahmā, the best of sounds comes from devas, and the best becoming is in the deva realms; he describes these beliefs as the province of the ordinary person, “the way of the manyfolk”⁷⁷⁹. Instead he maintains that the best of sights, sounds and becomings are those associated with the destruction of the taints, which marks the point at which one becomes an *ariyasāvaka*. That the course he prescribes provides the ultimate fulfilment is reinforced by the Buddha's claim that having carried out the course of

⁷⁷⁶M ii 196; Bhikkhu Bodhi 797.

⁷⁷⁷Ibid.

⁷⁷⁸For another example see the *Subha Sutta*, M ii 207-209; 816-818.

⁷⁷⁹A iii 201; Hare 149.

training and destroyed the *āsavas*, “beyond this there is no further development of knowledge and conduct that is higher or more perfect.”⁷⁸⁰

In the *Anguttara Nikāya*, the Buddha presents his version of four “brahmin truths” which “have been set forth by myself after fully comprehending and realising them for myself.” He lists the four as follows:

- “1. ‘All living things are not to be harmed.’ So saying a brahmin speaks truth, not falsehood. Therein he has no conceit of ‘recluse’ or ‘brahmin’. He has no conceit of ‘better am I’, ‘equal am I’, ‘inferior am I’. Moreover by fully comprehending the truth contained in that saying he is bent on the practice of mercy and compassion for all living things.
2. ‘All sense delights are impermanent, painful, of a nature to change.’ So saying a brahmin speaks truth ... ‘inferior am I’. Moreover by fully comprehending the truth contained in that saying he is bent on the practice of distaste for sense-delights, for passionlessness, for making an end thereof.
3. ‘All becomings are impermanent, painful, of nature to change.’ So saying ... he is bent on distaste for becomings ...
4. ‘I have no part in anything anywhere, and herein for me there is no attachment to anything’. So saying ... he is bent on the practice of having nothing at all.”⁷⁸¹

This passage is consistent with the Buddha’s treatment of brahmin teachings in other suttas; it demonstrates an emphasis on ethics and insight as a sign of being a ‘genuine’ brahmin. When insight into the way things really are is gained, then one no longer compares oneself to others or seeks sense pleasures, having seen that such pursuits only lead to suffering. According to the Buddha, these ‘brahmin truths’ supersede brahmin ritual practices such as sacrifices or reciting of the vedas, practices which are ultimately futile and do not bring liberation.

Summary

To summarise this chapter, we have seen how the Buddha regards the practices and teachings of wandering ascetics and brahmins as inferior to his own for various differing, but inter-connected reasons. He rejects some practices and rituals because they are irrelevant to the path to liberation, and thus futile. The teachings that inspire such practices are grounded in ignorance, and this provides a further reason why the

⁷⁸⁰D i 100; Walshe 119.

⁷⁸¹A ii 34; Woodward 38.

Buddha sees these teachings as inferior. Ultimately, all teachings that are not supported by personal experience are grounded in ignorance; the Buddha alone knows and sees for himself how one attains the cessation of suffering in all its completeness, and it is for this reason that he is superior. Other teachings might have positive, skilful elements to them, but they are limited in their scope to effect liberation; it is the Buddha's teaching alone that is "fully successful and perfect, with nothing lacking."⁷⁸² Even those groups that appear to teach the same thing as the Buddha are ultimately shown up to be ignorant, because they are not able to elaborate on their teachings in the same way that the Buddha or his followers are.

The message that is consistently portrayed, then, is that the Buddha's teaching is unique and ultimate in bringing about the cessation of suffering — any other teaching or practice is flawed in comparison. This does not mean to say that other teachings should be immediately dismissed — as we have seen, the Buddha advocates a 'gentle' approach towards other teachings in some places. However, it is still the case that ultimately, the Buddha's teaching is superior to any other. The reason for this is because, unlike any other teacher, the Buddha has seen reality as it really is, and through this insight has learnt how to attain the cessation of suffering. It seems legitimate to suppose, however, that the Buddha would not deny the possibility that other individuals could gain liberation *in principle*. This follows logically from the idea of the causality of liberation. As we have seen, this causal process is described as existing objectively, it is the 'nature of things', the way that the world really is. An objective causal process does not work 'exclusively' to one particular group; it is a law of nature that applies to everybody. This is a point that Jayatilleke makes in his pamphlet on "The Buddhist Attitude to Other Religions": "The concept of the Buddha as one who discovers the truth is clearly a source of tolerance. It leaves open the possibility for others to discover aspects of the truth or even the whole truth for themselves. The Buddhist acceptance of Pacceka-Buddhas, who discover the truth for themselves, is a clear admission of this fact."⁷⁸³

In *practice*, however, in the Nikāyas it is only the followers of the Buddha who understand and work in accordance with this causal law to its full realisation. It just so happens that all the attempts to gain liberation through other teachings that he has come across have had some fundamental flaws, because they are grounded in ignorance. The Buddha makes it clear that anybody who is to gain liberation will have perfected the qualities of the eightfold path that he has perfected, and progressed through the stages that he has been through. This is because there is a certain causal

⁷⁸² D iii 126; Walshe 431

⁷⁸³ Jayatilleke, *The Buddhist Attitude To Other Religions* (Kandy, The Wheel Publication no. 26, 1991), p. 21.

structure to reality. The Buddha knows and understands this causality, and it is this that marks him out as a ‘fully enlightened Buddha’. Other teachers that he has encountered do not have this insight, therefore it is a case of the ‘blind leading the blind’.

Let us briefly sum up the Buddha’s account of the relation of other views and practices to liberation as this has emerged in the course of this thesis. It will then be explained that this account is free from the incoherencies that undermine Hick’s post-Copernican hypothesis. The Buddha described a certain causal law that operates in reality, independent of any descriptions or perceptions of it. This causal law is summarised in the law of dependent origination, but it is more generally understood as the law of cause and effect that is presupposed by all of the Buddha’s teachings. I have called this the law of salvific causation, the idea that when certain skilful acts are undertaken, they will necessarily lead to liberation. The Buddha had reached a state of perfect knowledge and insight, in which he has seen reality as it really is, including the operation of this causal law. For this reason, he knows which actions relate to which effects, which beliefs lead to which actions, and so on. Thus some key presuppositions of the Buddha’s teaching are that there is a certain objective structure of reality, that it is possible to see this as it really is, and that the Buddha is one of those who has attained such insight. In the Nikāyas, the Buddha describes himself as unique in this respect; no other teachers have attained this liberating insight.

The Buddha judges other teachings according to how closely they accord positively with the causal process towards liberation. He rejects as “in opposition to the holy life” those which do not work in accordance with salvific causation, and has approbation for those that do. However, he sees his own teachings and path of practice as the best, for it has “nothing superfluous and nothing lacking”, and is “fully successful and perfect”. Some other teachings may help to develop the eightfold path in its positive aspect, but since they are not grounded in the ultimate wisdom of the Buddha’s insight, they are not “fully successful and perfect”. The Buddha’s teaching is presented as the fulfilment of such other teachings.

In the next chapter there will be a critical analysis of Hick’s hypothesis from the standpoint of the Buddhist tradition. Hick’s use of certain ‘Buddhist’ concepts will be compared with the concepts as they are presented in the Nikāyas. This will be used to argue that Hick ‘excludes’ Buddhist self-understanding, and that this sits uneasily with his professed pluralist intentions. It will be argued that the Buddha’s attitude to other religions as demonstrated in the Nikāyas is more coherent than Hick’s account. Finally there will be a consideration of how the Buddha might have viewed Hick’s hypothesis in the light of his teachings about other groups and views.

SECTION THREE:

**Critical Analysis of Hick's Hypothesis in the Light of the Buddha's
Attitude Towards other Teachings.**

CHAPTER SIX: Critical Evaluation of Hick's Post-Copernican Hypothesis.

In the first chapter of this thesis there was a presentation of the pluralistic hypothesis espoused by John Hick which included Hick's idea of how Buddhism is best understood as relating to other world faiths. It also demonstrated how Hick used 'Buddhist' concepts such as the 'Unanswered Questions' and 'Skilful Means' to develop and support his hypothesis.

The main body of the thesis (chapters two to five) has been concerned with the path to liberation as it is presented in the Pali Nikāyas. This has included a particular emphasis on the role of views and belief in attaining liberation, and has focused on the idea of the 'law of the eight-factored path' as a universal causal law that culminates in the result of liberation from suffering, *dukkha*. In the light of this, there has been an analysis of the Buddha's attitude towards other teachings and views as he encounters them (as presented in the Nikāyas).

This chapter will contain a critical analysis of Hick's teaching in the light of the Buddha's teachings that have been examined in previous chapters. Firstly, it will be argued that Hick is not, in fact, a pluralist, because his hypothesis actually *excludes* key elements of Buddhist self-understanding. Perhaps the most fundamental area of disagreement is epistemological — Hick's hypothesis rests upon what has been described as a "transcendental agnosticism"⁷⁸⁴. The term 'agnosticism' is used here to denote the view that we cannot know what reality is like in itself. The term 'transcendental' refers to the fact that this Reality ('the Real' as Hick calls it) is beyond human comprehension, transcending our understanding of it. Hick's thesis depends upon this view that the Real as it is in itself is unknown and unknowable to every religious tradition. It will be argued that to apply Hick's denial of unmediated experience to the Buddha's teaching is to deny the very foundation of the Buddha's message, namely his knowledge of reality "as it is". This poses problems of internal coherence for Hick's hypothesis; accepting Hick's argument would mean rejecting one of the fundamental tenets of Buddhism in favour of Hick's foundational presupposition of the inaccessibility of the Real *an sich*. This is problematic for Hick in that his hypothesis is intended to show that all religions are, in fact, true. It is hard to see how he can make this claim about Buddhism when he has, in effect, denied a foundational tenet of the Buddha's teaching. In this respect, Hick's hypothesis demonstrates "exclusivist" as opposed to "pluralist" tendencies. For in accepting Hick's agnosticism

⁷⁸⁴D'Costa first coined this term in his book *John Hick's Theology of Religions* (London, University Press of America, 1987), p.162. See also D'Costa's article, "John Hick and Religious Pluralism: Yet Another Revolution" in H. Hewitt (ed.), *Problems in the Philosophy of Religion: Critical Studies of the Work of John Hick* (London, Macmillan, 1991), p.7ff.

one is not simply rejecting a 'cosmetic' element of Buddhist teaching, but one of its fundamental tenets; thus in effect Buddhism is essentially "excluded" from the pluralistic hypothesis. These differences will be explained in some detail in this chapter with various examples from Buddhist thought to demonstrate the extent of Hick's departure from Buddhist self-understanding.

Secondly, it will be argued that Hick's own so-called 'pluralist' position is not, as he presents it, a "second order hypothesis"⁷⁸⁵, but a rival set of first-order truth claims, arising from a particular tradition and history. This is the tradition of Western liberal modernity, and Hick only includes those aspects of other religions that accord with this tradition, excluding those that do not. This provides further evidence that his hypothesis is not 'genuine' pluralism, but is actually a form of exclusivism.

Thirdly it will be acknowledged that Hick recognises and freely admits that he cannot accept all religions on their own self-understanding. He sees such reinterpretation as inevitable, and nevertheless presents his hypothesis as the most coherent treatment of the data provided by the different apparently conflicting world religions. This claim of greater coherence will be contested on the grounds that Hick's transcendental agnosticism leaves him with no ontological support for the sense of goodness and value on which his hypothesis relies. Hick sees the existence of ethical 'fruits' as a sign of the soteriological effectiveness of a religious teaching, but is unable to support this claim ontologically. The Buddhist tradition, however, does have such ontological support and is therefore more coherent than Hick's hypothesis. It will be argued that, whilst there are similarities between Hick and the Buddha on the pragmatic treatment of views and doctrines, the coherence of Hick's hypothesis is called in to question at the point at which he departs from the Buddhist tradition, namely on his denial of certain knowledge of the foundations of moral conduct. Thus it will be claimed that the Buddhist tradition is more coherent and effective in accommodating other religious traditions than Hick's pluralistic hypothesis. Thus on Hick's own criteria that the most coherent hypothesis is the one that should be employed⁷⁸⁶, he 'loses out' to the Buddhist tradition.

It is perhaps pertinent to point out at this stage that all of the above criticisms of Hick's thesis could be made in principle from the standpoint of other religious traditions, and not just the Buddhist one. It is not just Buddhist self-understanding, for example, that Hick denies. However, since this thesis is written from a standpoint within the Buddhist tradition, the shortcomings of Hick's hypothesis are demonstrated with 'Buddhist' examples. On the third line of criticism, the point that Hick's hypothesis is not the most coherent treatment of the data, there is room for an

⁷⁸⁵See p. 225, below.

⁷⁸⁶See Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, p. 51.

argument that the Buddhist tradition in fact provides a more coherent account of other religions than any other tradition, including Hick's. This is a line of argument I do not wish to pursue, partly because it would involve a much more lengthy discussion than the time and space-limits of this present thesis allows, and partly also for fear of engaging in just the sort of 'wordy warfare' and verbal disputing that the Buddha warned his followers against.

To close this thesis and critique of Hick's hypothesis on a distinctly 'Buddhist' note I will end this chapter with a brief attempt to imagine how the Buddha might have viewed Hick's hypothesis. Such a critique implicitly runs throughout this chapter, but will be summarised and made more explicit in the final section.

Hick's Hypothesis Excludes Buddhist Self-Understanding.

Hick maintains that his pluralistic hypothesis for relating to the different world religious traditions is preferable to the alternatives of naturalism and one-tradition absolutism:

"The options are either to affirm the absolute truth of one's own tradition, or go for some form of pluralistic view — or of course have no view and simply regard the whole matter as a mystery."⁷⁸⁷

I now wish to argue that, of these alternatives, Hick actually tends towards the position of one-tradition absolutism, because he judges other traditions by particular criteria that disqualify their truth claims in favour of his own. I will explain this point with regard to the Buddhist tradition, concentrating on the Buddhist notion of the possibility of unmediated experience of the Real as this is demonstrated in the teaching of the unanswered questions and of skilful means. I will compare Hick's account of these teachings with the way that they are presented in the Nikāyas to demonstrate the extent to which Hick diverges from Buddhist self-understanding. This is significant because this divergence disqualifies and truncates fundamental Buddhist tenets upon which the teaching rests. If it is only after being divested of its most central claims that the Buddhist tradition can be included in Hick's post-Copernican pluralistic hypothesis, this calls into question how genuinely 'pluralistic' the hypothesis is.

The Unanswered Questions.

We have seen that Hick's Post-Copernican hypothesis enables the co-existence of different truth claims by promoting a doctrine of 'religious ignorance' (p.53). We have also seen that Hick posits the pluralistic hypothesis as a more acceptable understanding of the co-existence of different faith traditions than the alternatives of

⁷⁸⁷Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, pp.48-9.

claiming all religious beliefs are illusory, or that only one tradition is true, and all others are mistaken. His approach to the problem is to claim that all religions have an incomplete picture of the Real, because it is ultimately inaccessible in its pure state.

We have seen that Hick uses the Buddha's teaching of the unanswered questions to support the religious ignorance element of his thesis. I now wish to argue that, in contrast to Hick's interpretation of it, the Buddha's teaching of the unanswered questions is entirely dependent upon the idea of the Buddha's complete religious knowledge for its coherence. The teaching of *dhamma* comes about in the context of the Buddha's knowledge of the way things truly are in ultimate reality; furthermore, it is a doctrine that is designed to help others see reality in itself by helping them to avoid getting side-tracked into preoccupations that are irrelevant to the path to liberation.

As we saw in chapter one (pp.57-8), Hick uses the unanswered questions in two ways. Firstly he makes the point that there is no purpose in dwelling on the differences between religious metaphysical claims when there is insufficient information to settle the question. If the questions are not answerable, it is a waste of energy to focus one's attention on these issues as soteriologically helpful. The second point for which Hick enlists the support of the unanswered questions is in connection with the inaccessibility of the Real — just as the Buddha explained that some questions cannot be answered because the conceptual terms in which they are couched do not apply to the subject, so ultimate reality “cannot be expressed in human terms”⁷⁸⁸. In fact, Hick does not merely want to say that the Real cannot be spoken of in human concepts, but rather that it is ‘unexperienceable’⁷⁸⁹ and “not directly known *an sich*”⁷⁹⁰. Having identified these two sorts of unanswered question, Hick uses them to argue for the soteriological irrelevance of myths and doctrines (when they are understood as describing the actual truth): “In response to the first group we develop theories, which can all too easily become sanctified as dogmas. In response to the second we develop myths. But neither theories nor the myths are necessary for salvation/liberation.”⁷⁹¹

Hick's first point about the futility of arguing over issues that cannot be resolved, is in accordance with the message of the *Cūḷamāhunkya Sutta*, where the Buddha points out that such issues are not conducive to salvation. Hick himself acknowledges, however, that it is possible that the Buddha did indeed know the answer to some of these questions⁷⁹², but that he saw their irrelevance to the process of liberation. As we have seen⁷⁹³, there is some scholarly debate about this issue, but

⁷⁸⁸Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p.347.

⁷⁸⁹Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p.246

⁷⁹⁰Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p.245

⁷⁹¹Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p.347.

⁷⁹²Hick, *Disputed Questions*, pp.106-7.

⁷⁹³See above, pp. 146-153.

even if one were to accept Hick's interpretation here, it surely poses problems for his thesis. On this understanding, the Buddha, even though he is merely human, does know the answers to questions that are unknown to other groups. He recognises that knowledge of such metaphysical facts is not conducive to liberation. Here, then, there is an implicit judgement of those groups or individuals who do hold that questions about the nature of the universe and the self after death are soteriologically significant. This is a point that Hick seems to miss in his reporting of the unanswered questions. The Buddha does not merely say that some questions are unhelpful — instead he describes such preoccupations as actual hindrances on the path to liberation. He explains to Mālunkya that the holy life does not depend upon the answers to the ten questions⁷⁹⁴, suggesting that such views are not only irrelevant, but actively stand in the way of spiritual development. This is a point on which the text is clear, even if it is not clear that the Buddha knows the answer to metaphysical questions such as whether or not the world is eternal. Either way, the presupposition of the Pali text is that the Buddha has complete knowledge of the way to liberation, and it is this knowledge that enables him to differentiate between useful and unhelpful views and doctrines. It seems that the Buddha's criticism here is aimed at teachings or individuals that ask such metaphysical questions in the first place. The Buddha's alternative is not just to refrain from asking such questions, but to follow his teaching which, through his ultimate insight, he knows is effective in bringing about liberation. It is ironic that Hick uses the unanswered questions to support his theory of religious ignorance when it is precisely the Buddha's *knowledge* that leads him to teach the unanswered questions in the first place.

It is important to recognise that in his teaching of the unanswered questions, the Buddha deals with *specific* questions that cannot be answered and are not conducive to the path. He does not judge all views in this way. In the previous chapter about the Buddha's encounters with other teachings, one of the suttas focused on was the *Sandaka Sutta*⁷⁹⁵. In it, the Buddha judges four different types of 'doctrine and view' that are at odds with the way of holy life that he teaches (*abrahmacariya*). These include this-worldly claims, such as denial that actions have consequences, and that there is no cause for the purification of beings. They also include what Hick would describe as metaphysical beliefs — the fourth way that the Buddha rejects consists of various claims about the universe, including the fact that everybody has a finite number of rebirths to go through, regardless of their actions. These views are rejected by the Buddha — this time, not on the grounds that they deal with subjects that are beyond knowledge, but that they encourage conduct that does not conduce to

⁷⁹⁴M i 431; Bhikkhu Bodhi 535.

⁷⁹⁵M i 513-524; Bhikkhu Bodhi 618-628.

positive development of the eightfold path. They are wrong views (*micchā-diṭṭhi*) of the lower sort. This suggests that there are some metaphysical views that, whether they can be verified or not, are wrong because anyone following them “would not attain the true way, the Dhamma that is wholesome.”⁷⁹⁶ As we have seen, however, Hick detaches the teaching of the unanswered questions from their original context, and uses the idea to support a general deprioritising of metaphysical questions. He uses this modified version, divorced of its connection with the Buddha’s insight into transcendent reality, to allow the co-existence of conflicting religious doctrines and to avoid dismissing a particular teaching because its metaphysical claims contradict those put forward by other groups. His point is that any metaphysical teaching is acceptable as long as it encourages a transformation from self-centredness to others-centredness, and that no particular metaphysic that is broadly followed within the major world religions is universally more successful at effecting this transformation than any other. The Buddha claims, however, that there are some metaphysical beliefs that are far more conducive to promoting skilful behaviour than others. Conversely, it is the nature of some beliefs that they bar the way to wholesome practice by undermining the very principles of the ‘holy life’ that the Buddha teaches.

There is further evidence to suggest that it is only certain types of question — not all questions — that the Buddha rejects as unhelpful. Indeed, as we have seen, the ability to answer some questions is seen by the Buddha as a sign that an individual is on the path to liberation, and has true insight. One such example is in the *Samyutta Nikāya* where other wanderers are unable to explain how the five hindrances are ten because they have inferior insight to the followers of the Buddha⁷⁹⁷. In this case, the inability to answer certain questions is a sign of ignorance and as such is ‘soteriologically significant’. The implication of the Buddha’s words is that wanderers of other groups who leave these particular questions unanswered are further from liberation than those who can answer the questions.

In Hick’s eyes, however, such questions are presumably to be understood as an area of “metaphysical difference” between Buddhism and other teachings, differences that ultimately “will not affect the all-important matter of salvation/liberation.”⁷⁹⁸ As we have seen, for Hick, “doctrinal differences” are merely matters of interest, rather than “matters of ultimate concern in which our religious existence is held to be at stake.”⁷⁹⁹ For the Buddha, the message seems to be different. With reference to the above question about the hindrances, the Buddha does not seem to be saying that one must answer such questions in order to gain liberation. Instead,

⁷⁹⁶ M i 516; Bhikkhu Bodhi 620

⁷⁹⁷ S v 109ff; Woodward 92. See above, pp. 200ff.

⁷⁹⁸ Hick, *Disputed Questions*, p. 108; see above, pp. 58-9.

⁷⁹⁹ Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 116; see above, p.61.

his message seems to be that one with liberating insight will understand reality to such an extent as to be able to describe it fully. Being able to answer such questions is a sign that an individual has gained liberating insight, or has been taught by one who has. Even if one has not seen the way reality truly is for oneself, one is being taught in a tradition which is informed by those who *are* genuinely liberated. As we have seen, one of the Buddha's criticisms of other groups and teachings is that they are led by individuals who are not themselves liberated, but stuck in a state of ignorance. Thus it is a case of the blind leading the blind. In the Nikāyas, the Buddha maintains that his teaching is unique in being grounded in liberating insight:

“I behold not, monks, anyone in the world, with its host of recluses and brahmins, with its devas and mankind, who could satisfy the mind with an answer to these questions, save only a Tathāgata or a Tathāgata's disciples, or at any rate after hearing it of them.”⁸⁰⁰

The inability to answer these ‘doctrinal’ questions therefore *is* soteriologically significant, for it demonstrates the salvific competency — and, in the case of the Nikāya-world, superiority — of the Buddha's teaching. This serves to underline the point that the Buddha's teaching of the unanswered questions is concerned with certain specific questions, rather than all metaphysical, doctrinal issues *per se*. As we have seen, this treatment of the unanswered questions differs radically from the way that Hick interprets the teaching. Whereas the unanswered questions as they are used by the Buddha are applied in a particular scenario to a specific set of questions, Hick uses the teaching as a general illustration of the relative unimportance of metaphysical questions. Whereas the Buddha's teaching of the unanswered questions is grounded in his knowledge of what liberation is and the way to attain it, this is a knowledge that Hick denies. Instead he reinterprets the ‘resource’ of the unanswered questions to support his transcendental agnosticism.

The unanswered questions thus provide one example of the way in which Hick de-contextualises a particular religious teaching and in doing so changes its meaning and significance. Why is this problematic for the coherence of Hick's hypothesis? It is problematic because, in this case, Hick's reinterpretation of the unanswered questions denies the knowledge in which the Buddha's teaching is grounded, namely his knowledge of reality as it really is. Hick therefore explicitly excludes a key part of Buddhist teaching from his pluralistic hypothesis. Let us now consider another example of this process, the teaching of skilful means.

Skilful Means: the Presupposition of Complete Knowledge.

⁸⁰⁰ S v 109; Woodward 92.

The teaching of the unanswered questions is the first of the Buddhist concepts that Hick uses in support of his pluralistic hypothesis. The second major idea he uses is the teaching of skilful means. Let us briefly explain the significance of skilful means in relation to Buddhism in the Nikāyas. In his examination of skilful means, Hick does not limit himself to Theravāda Buddhism, but puts a greater emphasis on Mahāyāna traditions, where the doctrine of skilful means is most developed. Indeed, as Michael Pye points out, “there is no evidence whatever that the Buddha himself ever used the terminology of skilful means.”⁸⁰¹ However, as he goes on to argue, the terms “say something about the nature of [the Buddha’s] teaching which it would be very difficult to dissociate from the initiator of the Buddhist tradition.”⁸⁰² Indeed, the aspects of skilful means that Hick focuses on are found — in spirit at least — in the Pali Canon, so it is perhaps useful to briefly survey some examples in order to understand better Hick’s approach. Pye cites certain specific suttas as containing examples of the Buddha’s ‘skilful means’ approach in the Pali Canon. The first is the *Ariyapariyesanāsutta*⁸⁰³, which gives the story of the Buddha’s decision to teach the Dhamma. When the Buddha first becomes enlightened he is reluctant to teach what he has learnt, because the Dhamma is ‘deep and subtle’ and other people will be too ignorant to understand it. From his position of knowledge the Buddha surveys the minds of people and compares them to a pond of lotuses; some remain in the mud, or under the water, but some can rise through the water and bloom above it. This is a recognition of various different levels of understanding in individuals — not all of them will be able to understand the Dhamma, but the Buddha will adapt his teachings to be accessible for those who have the potential to comprehend it. The Buddha then proceeds to teach his companions about the four noble truths and thus embarks upon his teaching. Pye sees this acknowledgement of different levels of understanding and different means of exposition as an early example of ‘skilful means’: “In general it is fair to say that the idea of a differentiated yet consistent teaching was the basic style of pre-Mahāyāna Buddhism anyway, presumed to stem from the Buddha himself. Skilful means is the Mahāyāna name for this style.”⁸⁰⁴ A further important aspect of the *Ariyapariyesanāsutta* is the Buddha’s claim that the Dhamma is “profound, hard to see and hard to understand ... unattainable by mere reasoning”⁸⁰⁵. The Buddha cannot teach the Dhamma in its pure form because the ordinary person would not understand it. Therefore he has to adapt his teachings to the needs of his followers:

⁸⁰¹Michael Pye, *Skilful Means: A Concept in Mahāyāna Buddhism*. (London, 1978), p. 118

⁸⁰²*Ibid.*

⁸⁰³M I 160-175; Bhikkhu Bodhi 253-268.

⁸⁰⁴Pye, *Skilful Means*, p. 126.

⁸⁰⁵M i 168; Bhikkhu Bodhi 260.

“The real meaning of the Buddha’s teaching can only be recognised in so far as one appreciates that it is at first formulated in manner appropriate to the entanglement of the hearers in passion and ignorance. The formulations that make possible the escape from passions and ignorance are themselves only necessary in so far as they lead to the disentanglement.”⁸⁰⁶

This is the philosophy behind the raft simile — the Buddha’s teaching is a means to an end, for ‘crossing over’ and not for ‘holding on to’. It is a teaching suited to the unenlightened mind, dominated by greed, hatred and delusion. Once the mind has become enlightened, these teachings can become impediments, like the raft which is carried around once one has attained the further shore. This tailoring of his teaching by the Buddha to suit the pragmatic purpose of bringing unenlightened beings to liberating insight is an early example of the philosophy that later crystallised into the doctrine of skilful means in the Mahāyāna tradition.

Pye argues that there must be some kind of “conceptual restraint” to prevent Buddhism from disappearing into other teachings, and to enable it to “maintain its grip on its own central meaning”⁸⁰⁷. Pye identifies this restraint as coming from the soteriological goal of the Buddha’s teaching; whatever produces the desired effect of progress in the right direction towards nibbāna is useful. The parable of the water-snake⁸⁰⁸ demonstrates this point that ‘true’ doctrines are not necessarily useful ones, for “the same item of doctrine may be both a barrier and a door depending on how it is used.”⁸⁰⁹ Pye sums up his understanding of skilful means in pre-Mahāyāna Buddhism as follows:

“Buddhist teaching is offered after some hesitation. It seeks forms which are appropriate to the recipients who are rooted in diverse cultural contexts. In spite of its rich variation of form, the teaching is not uselessly speculative but pragmatically related to its goal. Its meaning must be correctly grasped. Although the teaching is indispensable it is eventually disposable. It is in these ways that all knowledgeable Buddhists understand the workings of their tradition.”⁸¹⁰

Having briefly looked at the idea of skilful means as it appears in the Pali Canon, let us now recall Hick’s use of the doctrine in his pluralistic hypothesis. As we have seen, Hick interprets a narrower and a broader meaning of skilful means, the narrower being that a teacher knows a truth which he will communicate to others in

⁸⁰⁶Pye, *Skilful Means*, p.124.

⁸⁰⁷Pye, *Skilful Means*, p.130.

⁸⁰⁸*Alagaddūpama Sutta*, M i 134; Bhikkhu Bodhi 227. [See pages 154-5, above.]

⁸⁰⁹Pye, *Skilful Means*, p.134.

⁸¹⁰Pye, *Skilful Means*, p.137.

such a way that they come to understand it for themselves. The broader meaning, to which Hick devotes most of his attention, is the kind of attitude expressed in the parable of the raft, where the teachings are portrayed as pragmatic and non-dogmatic, a means to a certain end which are not to be attached to for their own sake.

To avoid falling into an abyss of self-reflexivity, Hick argues that Buddhism must limit the doctrine of skilful means at some point. For example, if nibbāna and the four noble truths are just means to an end and not inherently true, then they become “means which are not means to anything, and the whole system collapses into incoherence.”⁸¹¹ To avoid this difficulty, Hick introduces his idea of degrees of ‘upayity’. In his Kantian epistemology, with its insistence that one cannot experience reality as it is in itself, Hick concedes that everything has to be interpreted to a certain degree, so everything has a level of ‘upayity’ insofar as it is interpreted by the mind to serve certain individual or cultural purposes. Applying this to Buddhism, Hick argues that the Buddha could never teach reality ‘pure’, as it is inaccessible in this state. Thus the moment the Buddha taught dhamma he was employing skilful means. A certain level of ‘upayity’ is therefore inevitable for all statements and teachings in any religious or secular context. However, the four noble truths have a lower degree of upayity than, for example, the teaching of dependent origination. Hick makes this distinction on the grounds that the claims of, for example, the first noble truth, are founded in experience and more difficult to deny than, for example, the twelve links of dependent origination. The existence of suffering is an “experientable fact” that “no honest or reflective person” could deny; it is not a theory but an “experienced reality” (although like all experiences in this life, it is not ‘pure experience’ but is subject to perceptual interpretation.).⁸¹² Thus one of the determinants for the degree of upayity for any given theory is how self-evident and undeniable it seems in terms of our experience. Therefore, Hick judges that dependent origination has a higher level of upayity because it makes use of “optional concepts and assumptions”⁸¹³; it is not clearly apparent to any observer, unlike the existence of suffering. His argument is that, owing to the epistemic distance between the Real *an sich* and the different descriptions of it, dependent origination is no more true or false than any other religious interpretation of reality which places individuals in “soteriological alignment” with the Real. As we have seen, he argues that both Buddhism and Christianity, for example, are “both skilful means to a radically new or transformed state of being.”⁸¹⁴

How does Hick’s understanding of skilful means compare with the way the Buddha describes his own teaching in the Nikāyas? Firstly, there are certain

⁸¹¹Hick, *Disputed Questions*, p.121.

⁸¹²Hick, *Disputed Questions*, p.122.

⁸¹³Hick, *Disputed Questions*, p.124.

⁸¹⁴Hick, *Disputed Questions*, p.133.

similarities insofar as both Hick and the Buddha argue for an epistemic distance between the Real *an sich* and one's interpretation of it. As we have seen, however, one of the fundamental differences between Buddhism and Hick's hypothesis is that the Buddha claims to have bridged the epistemic gap by becoming enlightened, and not only states that it is possible to experience reality as it is, but claims to know how to lead others to this state. For the Buddha, the issue of skilful means arises in the context of trying to explain the path to this ultimate reality in terms comprehensible to the unenlightened mind. Ultimately, the problem for the Buddha is *communication*, rather than epistemology. In other words, the story of the Buddha portrays knowledge of reality 'as it is' as attainable by the human mind. However, it is attainable by a mind that is freed from greed, hatred and delusion. The deluded mind of the 'ordinary' person, however, is unable to perceive this reality; the ordinary person's perception is distorted by greed, hatred and delusion. The problem for the Buddha is how to describe this reality in terms that the unenlightened mind will understand, as such a description inevitably involves a distortion. This is why, as we saw in chapter two (pp.94-5), nibbāna tends to be described in terms of negative attributes - qualities that are absent from it - rather than in terms of positive attributes. Any attempt to describe the consciousness of the enlightened mind in terms of 'ordinary' discourse is doomed to failure, because the 'ordinary' consciousness perceives the world in categories such as 'self' and 'other' that do not apply on the transcendent level. Thus whilst the Buddha claims to have breached the epistemic gap between human knowledge and reality *an sich*, there is always a gap between language, and the reality that it describes. In this sense, all descriptions are *upayic*, in that they involve a level of interpretation. Thus, as Pye pointed out, it is the goal of the path itself, the liberation actually experienced by the Buddha, that provides the purpose and rationale for the Buddha's skilful means.

For Hick, however, the gap between the Real *an sich* and human consciousness is unbridgeable. It is not just a problem of linguistic difference, but of epistemological and ontological difference. Whereas the Buddha's teaching of skilful means is informed by his knowledge of the reality as it truly is, Hick thinks this knowledge is impossible. Once again, Hick's denial of the 'transcendent' level of insight is apparent.

I wish to argue that the Buddha's teaching of skilful means is dependent upon the presupposition of the transcendent level of truth, and this level is required for the coherence of his teachings. It is the clearly defined ultimate goal of the Buddha's teaching that enables him to distinguish between skilful and unskilful means and practices. The fact that all religious language (on the ordinary level) shares the same status of being ultimately provisional and non-dogmatic does not preclude some forms of language from being more conducive to liberation than others.

This approach presupposes a certain structure of reality. Some of this thesis has been concerned with an idea of ‘salvific causation’ which is epitomised in the eightfold path. This is the theory that when certain conditions are in place, development of all the factors of the eightfold path, (which sums up spiritual practice in general), is bound to occur, whether or not it is consciously willed. An individual who behaves ethically and cultivates meditative practice cannot help but develop the path factors positively — it is a law of nature that this is so. This law of nature is reality that terms such as “dependent origination” attempt to describe; it is true that there could be different descriptions of this, but the reality is what is presupposed by the Buddha’s teaching. It is this ‘natural’ causation that provides the connection between the two different forms of right view; one cannot gain transcendent right view simply by wishing it or by holding dependent origination, for example, as a cognitive view on the lower, ordinary level. However, given the right conditions of practice, then transcendent right view, insight into things as they really are, will follow automatically. Without this premise, the Buddha’s teaching would not make sense — the four noble truths would not be truths at all, but merely useful fictions. All of the Buddha’s teachings presuppose a certain causality which applies not only to his followers, but which is universal. Hick agrees that this is presupposed by the Buddhist tradition, arguing that the possibility of nibbāna is grounded in the fact that the universe has “a certain objective character”⁸¹⁵. However, Hick argues that the true character of the universe cannot be known because of the subjective activity of human interpretation. The Buddha of the Nikāyas, however, appears to argue that it is only on the unenlightened, ‘ordinary’ level that the universe’s character cannot be known; it is, however, possible to free oneself from this ignorance, and see the universe as it really is. This insight is accompanied by liberation from suffering.

This analysis of the unanswered questions and skilful means has demonstrated that Hick interprets and uses the Buddha’s teachings in way that differs radically from their presentation in the Nikāyas. The fact that Hick has used the teachings in a way that differs from the Buddhist self-understanding, however, does not *necessarily* undermine the coherence of his hypothesis. Hick never claims to be using the teachings in the same way as the Buddha, but instead sees them as “an important resource”⁸¹⁶. What Hick takes from this resource is the idea that “it is not necessary for liberation to know the true answers”⁸¹⁷ to certain metaphysical and cosmological questions. He finds “resources” from other traditions to make the same point. For example, as a representative of the Christian tradition, he cites Julian of Norwich’s

⁸¹⁵Hick, *Disputed Questions*, p.124.

⁸¹⁶Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p.343.

⁸¹⁷Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p.344.

teaching that truth is “hidden and closed” from us; for the Jewish tradition he explains that “the stress has always been upon right practice, both ritual and ethical, rather than right theory.”⁸¹⁸

My objection here, then, is not that Hick has reinterpreted the Buddha’s teachings, as he never claims to have used them in the same way as the Buddhist tradition. Instead, my objection is with the *way* that he has reinterpreted the teachings. For he has done so in such a way as to disqualify fundamental Buddhist claims. As we have seen, in his reinterpretation of both skilful means and the unanswered questions, Hick denies the Buddha’s knowledge of reality as it truly is, and denies the ‘salvific causality’ that is presupposed by the Buddha’s teaching of the gradual path to enlightenment. For a Buddhist to accept Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis it would be necessary for him or her to relinquish the possibility that the Buddha attained liberating insight into ultimate reality. This would be to reject the fundamental tenet on which the Buddha’s teaching is based. It would ultimately mean that a follower would have to concede that the Buddha’s teachings are not *true*. In effect, Hick’s ‘pluralistic’ hypothesis in fact ‘excludes’ Buddhism when it demands the relinquishing of a foundational tenet of Buddhist teaching.

This objection that Hick reinterprets a tradition’s truth claims in way that challenges its truth and self-understanding is also made from within the Christian tradition. Griffiths and Lewis exemplify this objection when they argue that, contrary to Hick’s hypothesis, Christians do believe that they are making fundamental claims about the nature of reality. Hick’s hypothesis amounts to a denial that this is what they are really doing, and thereby empties the beliefs of their cognitive content:

“Such an approach does not even do the tradition with which it is concerned the favour of taking it seriously on its own terms; it is almost certain to lead to such a serious distortion of the tradition that it can no longer be taken seriously as a representative of that tradition.”⁸¹⁹

This general point is also made by D’Costa, also writing from within the Christian tradition:

“It is curious that those wishing better relationships between religions and who are anxious to dispose of exclusivist claims, end up inadvertently not respecting the integrity of the different traditions and the seriousness and absoluteness of their claims and thereby erect a new exclusivism.”⁸²⁰

⁸¹⁸Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p.345.

⁸¹⁹Paul Griffiths and Delmas Lewis, “On Grading Religions. Seeking Truth and Being Nice to People - A Reply to Professor Hick”, *Religious Studies*, 19, 1983, pp.75-80, pp. 78-9.

⁸²⁰D’Costa, “Whose Objectivity? Which Neutrality? The Doomed Quest for a Neutral Vantage Point from which to Judge Religions.”, *Religious Studies*, 29, 1993, pp. 79-95, p.94., cited from *Rainbow of Faiths*, p.45.

This charge of 'exclusivism' is an important one. So far we have considered reasons why Hick is not genuinely 'pluralistic' because he departs from Buddhist self-understanding in such a way as to undermine the truth claims, and ultimately the coherence, of the Buddhist tradition. Let us now therefore consider the notion that Hick's 'pluralist' hypothesis is actually a form of exclusivism.

Is Hick an exclusivist?

Hick is aware of the charge that he does not accept religious traditions on their own self-understanding⁸²¹. However, he argues that the alternative to this process of reinterpretation is "simply to turn one's back on the whole project of a religious interpretation of religion in its wide variety of forms"⁸²², or else to maintain a one-tradition absolutism. I will now consider the objection that Hick's hypothesis logically falls into the latter category of a one-tradition absolutism. This is a charge made by D'Costa who argues that a pluralist view of religions is a logical impossibility, because any pluralist account entails the use of some criteria as a truth condition. Thus any tradition that does not meet these criteria is excluded: "There is no such thing as pluralism because all pluralists are committed to holding some form of truth criteria and by virtue of this, anything that falls foul of such criteria is excluded from counting as truth."⁸²³ In the case of the Buddhist tradition, the Buddha's claim to have unmediated experience of reality as it is is disallowed by Hick's hypothesis. This claim is thus "excluded from counting as truth", yet it is a claim on which the Buddha's teaching fundamentally rests.

How does Hick defend himself against this argument? Hick is keen to stress that his pluralistic thesis is simply a hypothesis, an attempt at explaining available data in a coherent manner, rather than a final truth claim about the way the world is. He argues that his hypothesis is a "proffered explanation" and not a "proof"⁸²⁴, in that it is always open to being superseded by a better explanation. It is an explanation that he finds preferable to one-tradition absolutism, because the absolutist position fails to take into account the apparent soteriological effectiveness of all the other traditions. Furthermore, if each tradition argues that it provides the only way to salvation/liberation then one has to make an arbitrary choice between many absolutist positions, for Hick argues that there is no evidence to point to the soteriological superiority of any tradition. In his defence to D'Costa's criticism, Hick argues that his hypothesis is of a different order to the absolutist claims of a religious adherent.

⁸²¹See for example, Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, p.45.

⁸²²Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, pp.48-9.

⁸²³D'Costa, "The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions", *Religious Studies*, 32, 1996, p. 226

⁸²⁴Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, p.51.

“religious exclusivism and religious pluralism are of different logical kinds, the one being a self-committing affirmation of faith, and the other a philosophical hypothesis. The hypothesis is offered as the best available explanation, from a religious as distinguished from a naturalistic point of view, of the data of the history of religions. Pluralism is thus not another historical religion making an exclusive religious claim, but a meta-theory about the relation between the historical religions. Its logical status as a second-order philosophical theory or hypothesis is different in kind from that of a first-order religious creed or gospel. And so the religious pluralist does not, like the traditional religious exclusivist, consign non-believers to perdition, but invites them to try to produce a better explanation of the data.”⁸²⁵

This defence is rejected by critics such as D’Costa, Milbank and Surin, who argue that, on the contrary, pluralism *is* “another historical religion making an exclusive claim”. D’Costa argues, for example, that “whatever criteria are specified they are always and necessarily tradition specific.”⁸²⁶, and that in the case of the pluralistic hypothesis, the ethical criteria that Hick applies are the product of modern Western liberalism: “If it is not from a secularist modern liberal outlook, as Hick sometimes suggests, what is it that makes the values of ‘acceptance, compassion, love for all humankind, or even for all life “normative”’?”⁸²⁷

Milbank makes a detailed critique of Hick from this perspective. He argues that the entire enterprise of comparing different religious traditions itself has its roots in the Western intellectual tradition. He maintains that when non-Western traditions have engaged in polemical debates with Western religious traditions, “this has usually been occasioned by immediate exigencies of cohabitation”⁸²⁸. In other words, these debates as discussions between ‘rival entities’ only occurred after the non-Western traditions had been categorised as “religions” with conflicting truth claims: “the other religions were taken by Christian thinkers to be species of the genus ‘religion’, because these thinkers systematically subsumed alien cultural phenomena under categories which comprise Western notions of what constitutes religious thought and practice.”⁸²⁹ Here it is useful to recall Gombrich’s discussion of ‘Protestant Buddhism’ in the introduction (p. 15-16) to this thesis, where the point is made that only after the influence of Western Christian missionaries did Buddhist teachers engage

⁸²⁵Hick, “The Possibility of Religious Pluralism: A Reply to Gavin D’Costa.” *Religious Studies*, 33, 1997, pp. 161-166, p.163.

⁸²⁶D’Costa, “Whose Objectivity? Which Neutrality?”, p.81.

⁸²⁷D’Costa, “John Hick and Religious Pluralism: Yet Another Revolution.”, p. 14.

⁸²⁸John Milbank, “The End Of Dialogue” in D’Costa ed., *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: the myth of a pluralistic theology of religions* (New York, Orbis, 1990), pp. 174-190, p. 176.

⁸²⁹Ibid.

in debates and apologetics with Christians. In fact, Milbank illustrates his point with a reference to the Buddhist tradition: “John Hick can speak of ‘many roads to salvation’, yet it is clear that Eastern religions do not on the whole seek deliverance by divine grace from a sinful or merely natural condition.”⁸³⁰ The point here, then, is that the very ‘problem’ that religious pluralists try to address, namely the existence of apparently conflicting religious truth claims, can be attributed to a particular way of categorising and understanding ‘religious’ phenomena that is grounded in a Western, Judeo-Christian intellectual tradition. The very framework in which Hick works, then, demonstrates that he operates from a particular historical tradition.

Milbank’s arguments similarly question Hick’s choice of those religions that qualify as being equally soteriologically effective. For the criteria on which they are judged as ‘equal’ is also tradition specific:

“One can only regard dialogue partners as equal, independently of one’s valuation of what they say, if one is already treating them, and the culture they represent, as valuable mainly in terms of their abstract possession of an autonomous freedom of spiritual outlook and an open commitment to the truth. In other words, if one takes them as liberal, Western subjects, images of oneself.”⁸³¹

Continuing with the issue of criteria, Milbank goes on to argue that the pluralist’s tendency to look at practice as a criteria of soteriological efficacy is rooted in Western liberalism which itself has roots in its “Hellenic-Roman-Christian-Jewish inheritance.”⁸³² This idea that puts criteria in the arena of practice, “a politico-legal discourse about justice and liberation that the religious traditions can now all share in common” distorts and denies aspects of other traditions. For different religious traditions have often had fundamental differences over practice: “The uncritical embrace of modern norms of politics and legality leads the contributors to gloss over, and even try to deny, the obvious fact that religions have differed over political and social practice quite as much as anything else.”⁸³³ Milbank concludes that practice “turns out to be no neutral meeting ground, but rather the place where the other religions and even Christianity itself to some degree, have been most engulfed by the dominance of secular norms.”⁸³⁴

The argument here, then, is that the framework and criteria for Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis are not “second-order” and somehow “neutral” tools, but part of a tradition and history that is of the same logical order and status as the other

⁸³⁰Ibid.

⁸³¹John Milbank, “The End of Dialogue”, pp. 177-8.

⁸³²John Milbank, “The End of Dialogue”, p.174.

⁸³³John Milbank, “The End of Dialogue”, pp.181-2.

⁸³⁴John Milbank, “The End of Dialogue”, p.184.

‘religious’ traditions that it judges. Logically, it is a ‘first-order’ and not, as Hick maintains, a ‘second order’ claim. Surin makes the point that even the *logic* of the pluralistic hypothesis belongs to the Western liberal tradition; it is not universal:

“Traditional liberal intellectuals pride themselves on acknowledging heterogeneity and plurality, but this acknowledgement is always fatally compromised by a deployment of homogenous logic - a logic which irons out the heterogeneous precisely by subsuming it under the categories of comprehensive and totalizing global and world theologies.”⁸³⁵

A further interesting point is made by Donovan, who draws a distinction between *epistemic* and *ideological* liberalism. He describes epistemic liberalism as “liberty of opinion as an epistemological principle”⁸³⁶, namely the notion that a plurality of opinion should always be heard, “not so as to absorb them all into rational uniformity, but so as to guarantee that any belief of opinion presently held as the truth remains constantly open to challenge and correction.”⁸³⁷ Epistemic liberalism, then, describes a certain attitude towards learning and knowledge.

Donovan characterises *ideological* liberalism, however, as a “total belief-system and political policy” which does, indeed, try to absorb other opinions into a rational, trans-global uniformity. He makes an implicit criticism of Hick on these lines, arguing that pluralists’ claims to be making only ‘second order’ judgements are all part of their ideological commitment to liberalism: “Despite describing their efforts as ‘hypotheses’ only, pluralist theologians ... have laid themselves open to the charge of seeking to promote some new, all-embracing, global ideology, a universal faith or world theology.”⁸³⁸

As we have seen, Hick clearly tries to use the “just a hypothesis” defence in arguing that his model is a “second order philosophical theory”, not a “first order religious creed”. In the light of the preceding discussion, this claim seems highly questionable. Hick’s hypothesis clearly employs certain criteria, criteria chosen and determined by the Western liberal tradition that Hick writes from. The logic and framework of the hypothesis, too, is a product of a particular Western intellectual tradition. As we have seen, Hick’s hypothesis *excludes* certain key elements of Buddhist teaching. It excludes them because Hick has chosen to prioritise his own criteria and set of value judgements (namely, those of Western liberal modernity) over the Buddhist ones. For, as we have seen, the Buddha did have ways of accounting for

⁸³⁵Kenneth Surin, “A ‘Politics of Speech’: Religious Pluralism in the Age of the McDonald’s Hamburger”, in *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, pp. 192-212, p.210.

⁸³⁶Peter Donovan, “The Intolerance of Religious Pluralism”, *Religious Studies*, 29, 1993, pp. 217-229; p.220.

⁸³⁷Donovan, “The Intolerance of Religious Pluralism”, p.222.

⁸³⁸Donovan, “The Intolerance of Religious Pluralism”, pp. 221-2

the existence of other groups and teachings, and these judgements are implicitly rejected by Hick when he disallows the Buddha's claim to ultimate knowledge. It is ironic that one of the reasons why Hick rejects Buddhist (or any religion's) self-understanding is because he mistrusts one-tradition absolutism, for Hick himself is a one-tradition absolutist in prioritising the values of Western liberal modernity over others.

This brief survey of an important area of criticism of Hick suggests that he is, in fact, logically an *exclusivist* in so far as his hypothesis operates with certain tradition-specific criteria that exclude other traditions.

Suppose, however, that Hick were to concede the point (although he does not) that his hypothesis is in fact a 'first order claim', of the same logical status as the different religious traditions that he describes. Hick would presumably want to argue that his hypothesis makes better sense of the data than other accounts; it is more coherent. As we saw earlier in this chapter, Hick does in fact concede that other religious adherents may not recognise their own self-understanding in his characterisation of their traditions:

"A global interpretation which starts from the rough salvific parity of the great traditions will not be identical with the belief-system of any one of them. This is why we have either to seek a more comprehensive view, or else each return to the absolutism of our own tradition, with Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and so on each affirming the unique superiority of their own path."⁸³⁹

It has so far been argued that Hick's 'more comprehensive view' operates as another form of 'absolutism', despite his denials of this. If, for the sake of argument, we suppose that Hick concedes this point, on what grounds does Hick think that his account is 'superior' to others? Hick sees the advantage of his account as its greater coherence, its better explanation of the data: "The hypothesis is offered as 'the best explanation', i.e. the most comprehensive and economical explanation, from a religious point of view, of the facts of the history of religions."⁸⁴⁰ He argues that the 'superiority' of this explanation can only be challenged by the existence of a more coherent explanation: "the right response of someone who does not like my proposed explanation is not to complain that it is not proved but to work out a viable alternative."⁸⁴¹

Hick therefore supports the 'superiority' of his account on the grounds that it is the most coherent treatment of the data available. I now wish to challenge this claim

⁸³⁹Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, p.48.

⁸⁴⁰Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, p.51.

⁸⁴¹*Ibid.*

on two grounds. Firstly, I wish to argue that Hick's account is not, in fact, coherent because his transcendental agnosticism severs the ontological backing for his use of ethical criteria. Secondly, I wish to argue that the Buddhist tradition is not prone to this incoherence, and that it is thus a more coherent account than Hick's post-Copernican pluralistic hypothesis. On Hick's own criteria, then, the Buddhist account is superior to Hick's hypothesis.

Hick's Account is Undermined by Incoherence.

I now wish to argue that Hick's hypothesis is internally incoherent. As we have seen, Hick postulates that the Real *an sich* is unknowable, transcending human understanding. For Hick, since we cannot know ultimate reality in order to verify the cognitive truth of any metaphysical claims, the only way of finding out whether they are 'appropriate' myths, in 'soteriological alignment' with the Real, is to examine the ethical conduct that they encourage⁸⁴². Any tradition that fulfils this 'ethical criterion' can be understood as an 'authentic' response to the Real. As we saw in chapter one, Hick's criteria for judging soteriological effectiveness is pragmatic; it is demonstrated in the presence of 'saints' within religious traditions. 'Saints' he defines as individuals in whom the qualities of selflessness and self-giving love are developed to a significant degree.⁸⁴³ Similarly, the existence of the ethical 'golden rule' that it is wrong to harm others is a sign, for Hick, that a religious tradition is in 'soteriological alignment with the Real.'

The problem for Hick with this element of his hypothesis is that he is unable to explain *why* or *to what extent* the existence of ethical fruits is a sign of salvation/liberation, for on his own admission he does not know what the Real is like or what exactly salvation/liberation consists of. Hick's claim is not simply that he does not, in practice, know what the Real is like, but that *in principle*, the Real cannot be known *an sich*. This is demonstrated in his Kantian epistemology:

"In this strand of Kant's thought ... which I am seeking to press into service ... the noumenal world exists independently of our perception of it and the phenomenal world as that same world as it appears to our human consciousness. Analogously I want to say that the noumenal Real is experienced and thought by different human mentalities, forming and formed by different religious traditions, as the range of gods and absolutes which the phenomenology of religion reports."⁸⁴⁴

⁸⁴²Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, pp. 299-372, esp. pp. 300-1

⁸⁴³See Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion* pp. 300-309.

⁸⁴⁴Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 242.

Hick is thus making an *ontological* claim about the Real, namely that it is not knowable. Hick's hypothesis is thus founded in an ontological agnosticism, and this is problematic because it leaves Hick with no ontological backing for his value judgements about what is ethically 'good' and 'true'. If Hick knows nothing about the Real, what justification can he have for saying that certain kinds of conduct are in 'soteriological alignment' with it? Hick is criticised on these grounds by D'Costa, who argues that *praxis* always has some relation to theory; it requires some notion of what is 'good' practice and what is 'bad'. Hick's agnosticism severs such a connection:

"In defining ... more precisely the terms *soteria*, Kingdom, love, and so on, we are inevitably driven back to the theory and the particularities of each tradition. Theory, of course, retains a dialogical relation to praxis. If Hick follows the route of transcendental agnosticism he cannot answer this question."⁸⁴⁵

Citing other critics, Hick himself characterises this objection: "You start with the assumption that these various traditions are authentic responses to the Real, and then you use their moral teachings as the criterion by which to judge that they *are* authentic responses to the Real! Isn't this clearly a vicious circle?"⁸⁴⁶

Hick's response to this objection is that such a circular argument is inevitable because ultimately, any argument deals with foundationalist assumptions that cannot be proved: "It's the kind of circle which *any* comprehensive view inevitably involves... There are no non-circular ways of establishing fundamental positions."⁸⁴⁷ He thus maintains that there is no alternative to this circular argument. Surely, however, this is not the case. The Buddha, for example, would claim that there *is* a non-circular way of justifying a position, namely knowledge and insight into reality as it really is. It is this seeing things as they are that underpins all of the Buddha's teachings, and 'justifies' all his claims. Hick's claim that there are no non-circular means of justification presupposes his Kantian epistemological model. His transcendental agnosticism in relation to the Real *precludes the possibility* of the foundational grounding of a position in reality, because this reality is unknown and unknowable. Indeed, the fact that Hick presupposes a Kantian epistemology here serves to confirm the above objection that he is operating from a certain intellectual heritage which excludes alternative accounts, such as the Buddhist one.

⁸⁴⁵Gavin D'Costa, "John Hick and Religious Pluralism: Yet Another Revolution," in ed. Hewitt, *Problems in the Philosophy of Religion* (London, Macmillan, 1991), p. 15.

⁸⁴⁶Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, p.78. Hick cites as an example Timothy R. Stinnett, "John Hick's Pluralistic Theory of Religion", *The Journal of Religion*, 70, 1990, p.79.

⁸⁴⁷Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, p.78.

Effectively, Hick is saying that, since there are no non-circular means of justifying his pragmatic criteria, this does not undermine the coherence of his hypothesis, for there is no alternative. However, it is only by presupposing the truth of his transcendental agnosticism that the possibility of an alternative is denied. One could respond simply by rejecting Hick's premise of transcendental agnosticism. The difficulty with this for Hick is that it leads to the position of 'one-tradition absolutism' where each different tradition claims that it is unique in knowing Reality *an sich*. It has already been suggested that Hick's hypothesis itself is a form of one-tradition absolutism. However, even if we accept Hick's argument on this point, his hypothesis still runs into incoherence. Hick finds the 'one-tradition absolutist' position a less coherent treatment of the data of religious phenomena than his own, because it appears that all the main religious traditions, and not just one, are soteriologically effective. He believes this on the grounds of the pragmatic ethical 'fruits' that are found within each tradition. But here we have returned to the initial difficulty: if Hick does not know what the Real *an sich* is like, then how can he know which 'fruits' are a sign of 'alignment' with it? The very transcendental agnosticism that Hick maintains with the aim of allowing religions to exist as equals in fact undermines his hypothesis, because Hick's criteria for perceiving this 'equality' is without basis or foundation.

In contrast, the Buddhist position can provide justification for the 'fruits' approach, because the notion of skilful and unskilful behaviour has ontological support in the Buddha's insight into the objective structure of reality. The greater coherence of the Buddhist position on this account will now be illustrated.

The Greater Coherence of the Buddha's Approach.

Hick's argument in defence of his pluralistic hypothesis is that it is more coherent than other alternatives; he challenges those who reject his hypothesis to offer a more coherent alternative. In the previous section it has been argued that Hick's hypothesis is internally incoherent because of his failure to provide ontological justification for the ethical values he promotes. I now wish to rise to Hick's challenge and suggest that the Buddha's treatment of other 'religions' is more coherent than Hick's hypothesis.

The first point to make is that, unlike Hick, the Buddha does have ontological support for the ethical values he promotes. As we saw in the discussion of the eightfold path and views, Buddhist teaching contains two levels of truth⁸⁴⁸. This can be described as 'ordinary', 'conventional', or 'worldly' (*lokīya*) truth, and 'transcendent' or 'ultimate' (*lokuttara*) truth. The ordinary level of truth is used to describe the world as it is understood by the unenlightened mind. The perception and

⁸⁴⁸See above, p.156.

understanding of the ‘ordinary person’ is clouded and distorted by factors rooted in greed, hatred and delusion. Having completed the course of training crystallised in the Buddha’s teaching of the eightfold path, a disciple’s mind becomes freed of these obscuring factors. Such an individual is described as a ‘noble disciple’ (*ariyasāvaka*), and he or she is said to see reality as it really is. This knowledge is described as ‘transcendent’ (*lokuttara*) right view; it is the way reality appears once the distorting factors of greed, hatred and delusion have been transcended. According to the Buddha, this ‘transcendent’ view is insight into the ultimate truth about the way the world is; it is seeing things as they truly are.

As a result of this insight into reality, the Buddha knows that it is the nature of certain views and beliefs that they affect the mind and conduct in certain ways. It is clear, for example, from the *Sandaka Sutta* that certain specific views will not and cannot promote conduct that encourages development towards liberation (pp.168-172). For the Buddha, then, there is a definite and specific connection between certain views and conduct. The Buddha is able to specify a ‘hierarchy’ of views because his knowledge of liberation and the path to its attainment furnishes him with specific criteria. For example, he is able to claim that denial of the efficacy of action is a definite hindrance to the development of the holy life. Hick, on the other hand, does not have recourse to any such criteria, because he denies that there is a standpoint of objective knowledge from which different beliefs can be judged. Thus, his criteria for evaluating beliefs comes *a posteriori*, and is deduced from the ‘evidence’, whereas the Buddha’s assessment comes *a priori* from his insight into the causal nature of reality. The Buddha, then, does have clear criteria for judgement (i.e. his knowledge of the path to the cessation of suffering) and evaluates different teachings accordingly. Unlike Hick, he sees a direct causal relationship between views and conduct which enables him to be specific in his judgements of views. As we saw earlier in the *Apaṇṇaka Sutta*⁸⁴⁹, it is “to be expected” that certain views will produce wholesome results and certain ones will encourage unwholesome conduct. The Buddha’s judgement on views is a claim about the nature of objective reality seen as it really is by the enlightened mind, from a viewpoint that Hick maintains is impossible. By the postulation of this foundational knowledge in which the Buddha’s ethical judgements are grounded, the Buddhist tradition avoids the undermining vagueness that plagues Hick’s use of ethical criteria. This difference between the Buddha’s teaching and Hick’s hypothesis is demonstrated in the higher specificity of the Buddha’s criteria for liberation. As we have seen, the Buddha’s criteria goes beyond just ethical conduct. In the *Tevijja Sutta*, for example, we saw that brahmins who have highly developed ethical conduct attain their goal of union with Brahṃā (p.205ff.) On Hick’s account,

⁸⁴⁹M i 402; Bhikkhu Bodhi 507.

these individuals would have attained salvation/liberation. The Buddha, however, describes how these individuals still have more to perfect in terms of morality, wisdom and concentration; because the Buddha has a clear idea of what liberation consists of (unlike Hick), he is able to be highly specific in his criteria.

Another area in which the coherence of Hick's hypothesis has been questioned is in its claim to be genuinely 'pluralistic' when in fact it logically operates as a form of exclusivism. Hick seems wary of making claims that 'exclude' other traditions, but nevertheless he implicitly does so, and does so by using certain tradition-specific criteria. The Buddha is more consistent on this account; his insight into the objective nature of reality gives him an objective justification for his judgements of other traditions. Hick, however, implicitly makes judgements without having objective justification for them.

Let us briefly summarise the argument of this chapter. Firstly, it has been argued that Hick radically undermines Buddhist self-understanding. In doing so he effectively 'excludes' the Buddhist tradition from inclusion in his hypothesis, making his claims that his hypothesis is 'pluralist' seem highly questionable.

Secondly, it has been argued that Hick's hypothesis is a form of exclusivism in so far as it arises from, and expresses the values of a particular historical and intellectual tradition. Other religions are 'judged' by the standpoint of this tradition. This leads to the internal contradiction that Hick is being exclusivist when he claims to be a pluralist.

Thirdly, another internal incoherence has been demonstrated in Hick's use of the 'ethical fruits' criteria. It has been argued that Hick's transcendental agnosticism severs the ontological justification for these criteria, rendering them meaningless.

Fourthly, it has been argued that the Buddha's approach to other teachings as presented in the Nikāyas does not contain the incoherencies of Hick's pluralistic hypothesis. It thus represents a more coherent alternative to Hick's account.

How Might the Buddha have Viewed Hick's Hypothesis?

Finally, I would like to briefly offer an account of how the Buddha might have viewed Hick's hypothesis. This is a large and complex subject and space is limited, however, a brief sketch of this analysis, apart from being of interest in itself, will serve to highlight the differences between Hick's hypothesis and Nikāya Buddhism. This will bring into relief those aspects of Buddhist self-understanding that Hick's hypothesis denies.

Although most of this chapter has been dedicated to showing how Hick misrepresents the Buddhist tradition, in many ways I think the Buddha would have approved of Hick's hypothesis in that in significant respects it is conducive to the

development of positive wholesome states. Although, ultimately it is an ‘ordinary’ view, and thus made from a position of fundamental ignorance, it nevertheless demonstrates many facets of ‘ordinary’ right view.

Hick’s hypothesis as Ordinary Right View.

In Chapter Four there was an analysis of ‘ordinary right view’ as described in the *Sāleyyaka Sutta* (p.126.). Using this definition of ordinary right view, I want to suggest that Hick’s hypothesis is an example of such a view in that it commends the practise of conduct “in accordance with the Dhamma”. For example, in his approval of “love, compassion, generosity, mercy”⁸⁵⁰, and his disapproval of conduct that is “selfish, cruel, deceitful, exploitative and malicious”⁸⁵¹, Hick clearly promotes the abstention from ‘unwholesome’ factors such as taking life, taking the not-given, sexual misconduct, malicious or false speech, covetousness and hatred. In the *Sevitabbāsevitabba Sutta*, ordinary right view is described as that which causes a decrease in unwholesome states, and an increase in wholesome states⁸⁵². Hick’s hypothesis works in alignment with this analysis, for he approves of those religious (or even secular) traditions that “teach the moral ideal of generous goodwill, love, compassion”.⁸⁵³

From the viewpoint of the Buddhist tradition, this is right view because such conducts leads to positive development of the factors epitomised in the eightfold path; it is a sign that the law of ‘salvific causation’ is operating in the right direction, towards fruition. As we saw in the *Bhayaberavasutta* any beings who “were possessed of good conduct in speech and thought” and who “did not scoff at the Ariyans” will have a pleasant rebirth.⁸⁵⁴

Hick would therefore be approved of for his ethical code and his recognition of ordinary right view. There are other respects in which I suggest that the Buddha would have approved of Hick’s views. In the *Apaṇṇaka Sutta*, we saw the Buddha’s approval of certain pragmatic attitudes towards views held by the ordinary person who acknowledges his position of ignorance⁸⁵⁵. When faced with various teachings about life after death a “wise [ordinary] man”, explains the Buddha, would recognise that he has not “known or seen” for himself which, if any, teaching is true. Instead, he judges which teaching to follow on the grounds of the probable ethical and spiritual consequences of following it. In the absence of personal knowledge, he recognises

⁸⁵⁰ Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 326.

⁸⁵¹ Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, p.77.

⁸⁵² M iii 45-61; Bhikkhu Bodhi pp. 913-924.

⁸⁵³ Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 316.

⁸⁵⁴ See above, p. 173.

⁸⁵⁵ See above, p. 127 ff.

that it “would not be fitting” to declare that only one view is right, and that all the others are wrong.⁸⁵⁶ He therefore chooses to approve of those views that are likely to tend towards freedom from clinging and lust. Thus he recognises that a view that denies that actions have consequences, for example, leaves one with less motivation for acting ethically. If he were to follow this view and behave unskillfully, then if he were wrong he would suffer bad consequences; if he were right, then he would not have lost or gained anything. If he were to behave as if actions do have consequences, then if he were right he would gain much by acting skillfully; if he were wrong he would have lost nothing. Therefore it makes sense for him to act skillfully as though actions do have consequences. There are certain similarities between Hick and the ‘ordinary man’ in the *Apaṇṇaka Sutta*. Like the wise man, Hick knows that he is in a position of not knowing and seeing whether a particular doctrine is true; as a result he does not commit himself to the truth claims of any one particular tradition, preferring instead to opt for ‘transcendental agnosticism’. It is important to note, however, that this argument only works if Hick’s agnosticism is understood in its weak form, namely as an admission that he in fact does not know what the Real is like. From a Buddhist perspective, this is an honest recognition of the limited viewpoint of the ordinary person. Although, unlike the wise man, Hick understands the value of ethical conduct as a foundational truth, he is like the wise man in that he judges a particular view on its psychological and ethical effects. However, if Hick’s agnosticism is interpreted in its stronger form, as an in-principled denial of the possibility of knowledge of reality as it is, then Hick is in fact making a rival truth claim; he is saying that he *knows* that he cannot know. His claim then becomes a knowledge-claim, rather than an admission of ignorance.

There is a further interesting point of divergence, here. The Buddha points out that, without knowing and seeing for oneself (i.e. transcendent right view), an individual cannot know if there is any point in acting ethically. Hick, however, clearly accepts as a ‘given’ the value of ethical conduct: “one cannot prove such a fundamental principle. It is too basic to be derived from prior premises.”⁸⁵⁷ One must question the coherence of this claim with Hick’s position of agnosticism. What sort of ‘knowledge’ does Hick have of the fundamental principle that it is wrong to cause suffering to others? Hick claims that one cannot know reality as it really is, how is his foundational belief in the principle that it is wrong to cause suffering to others consistent with this claim? Surely, if he is really in a position of ignorance, it would be more consistent for him to be agnostic about morality too, just like the ‘wise man’ in the *Apaṇṇaka Sutta* who elects to act ethically as a rational, pragmatic decision, rather

⁸⁵⁶See above, p. 129 ff.

⁸⁵⁷Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p.312.

than from a fundamental conviction. Indeed, this is one of the problem's with Hick's use of ethical criteria; since they are not grounded in foundational knowledge Hick is vague and non-specific about them.

From the perspective of the Nikāyas, it seems plausible to suggest that Hick's ethical convictions are a form of *saddhā*, 'confidence' or 'faith'. It is a position of 'confidence' as opposed to knowledge insofar as the ordinary person has not seen for himself the ultimate consequences of ethical action and how it relates to liberation. On his own admission, Hick does not *know* (i.e. he does not have 'transcendent right view') the ultimate structure of reality; however, his conviction that right ethical conduct leads to positive soteriological benefits is a right view, and a form of *saddhā*.

So far, then, we have seen that the Buddha might approve of Hick's hypothesis in so far as it advocates skilful conduct, and as such is a form of right view. It might also be approved of in so far as Hick recognises his limited knowledge, recognises that he does not 'know and see' reality as it really is. However, there are other accounts on which it might not be approved; let us now consider some possible objections to Hick's hypothesis in the light of the Buddha's teaching on views in the *Brahmajāla Sutta*.

The Brāhmajāla Sutta.

In Chapter Four there was a section on the *Brahmajāla Sutta*, the discourse in which the Buddha categorises and analyses sixty-four different kinds of metaphysical views and beliefs. How would Hick fit into this analysis? Once again, I wish to argue that there are some respects in which the Buddha would view Hick's approach favourably. In other respects, however, it would be open to criticism. As we have seen, the *Brahmajāla Sutta* begins with the Buddha speaking out against engaging in disputes over matters of doctrine. It seems that Hick's pluralistic hypothesis is partly motivated by a desire to avoid such disputation. In his explanation of the need for a pluralistic hypothesis in *An Interpretation of Religion*, one of Hick's justifications is that the pluralistic hypothesis is more satisfactory than the two alternative positions. These he characterises as, on the one hand, "the sceptical view that religious experience is *in toto* delusory", and on the other the "dogmatic view that it is all delusory except that of one's own tradition."⁸⁵⁸ Regardless of whether or not he is judged successful, one of Hick's motivations in the pluralistic hypothesis is to suggest a model of understanding that does not place religious beliefs and adherents in opposition to each other, but which accommodates their claims. The fact that he puts

⁸⁵⁸Hick, *An Interpretation of Religion*, p. 235.

forward his point as a “hypothesis”, rather than a “proof”⁸⁵⁹ or final truth claim suggests that he is keen to avoid the kind of dogmatism that the Buddha caricatures in the *Brahmajāla Sutta*: “Your way is all wrong - mine is right! ‘I am consistent - you aren’t’.”⁸⁶⁰ In this respect, then, I wish to argue that the Buddha would have some approval of the motivation behind Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis.

Nevertheless, from the Buddha’s perspective of transcendent right view, Hick’s hypothesis is an “ordinary view” and thus “merely the feeling of those who do not know and see, the worry and vacillation of those immersed in craving.”⁸⁶¹ In terms of the sixty-four types of view listed, Hick’s hypothesis in some ways resembles the group of views which, in various ways, postulate post-mortem survival. As we have seen, Hick postulates eschatological verification, the idea that his hypothesis can be verified or falsified after death: “I believe that there is a final state, a fulfilment of the project of human existence, beyond this life, perhaps beyond many lives.”⁸⁶² He admits not knowing what such an existence will be like, whether it will be conscious, unconscious or neither conscious nor unconscious, but the Buddha rejects all of these views as “the worry and vacillation of those immersed in craving.”⁸⁶³ Similarly, the transcendental agnosticism element of Hick’s thesis bears some resemblance to the views of the eel-wrigglers, who realise their position of ignorance, and are non-committal about metaphysical claims: “I don’t say that. I don’t say it is otherwise. I don’t say that it is not. I don’t not say it is not.”⁸⁶⁴ As we saw in chapter four, (p.135-7) the problem with all these views is that they are claims made from a position of ignorance; they are all dependently arisen and ultimately the product of ignorance and craving. A disciple who has clear insight into this causal progress, namely one who sees reality as it is, is freed from such views: “When a monk understands as they really are the arising and passing away of the six bases of contact ... he knows that which goes beyond all these views.”⁸⁶⁵

From the Buddhist perspective, then, although Hick’s hypothesis may have factors that qualify it as an ‘ordinary right view’, it is ultimately a ‘view’ rather than insight into the way things really are. The Buddha, however, has knowledge of the way things really are, and this is grounds for the salvific superiority of his teachings. In the *Pāsādikā Sutta* we saw that the Buddha rejected various metaphysical views like those listed in the *Brahmajāla Sutta* on the grounds: “I do not consider such theories equal to my own, still less superior. I am their superior in regard to the higher

⁸⁵⁹See Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, p.51.

⁸⁶⁰D i 9; Walshe 71. (See p. 131. above.)

⁸⁶¹D i 40; Walshe 87.

⁸⁶²Hick, *The Rainbow of Faiths*, p.72.

⁸⁶³D i 40-41; Walshe 88.

⁸⁶⁴D i 26; Walshe 80.

⁸⁶⁵D i 45; Walshe 89.

exposition.”⁸⁶⁶ The Buddha’s “higher exposition” is superior on the grounds that it is founded in insight and not in ignorance and craving.

On his own admission, Hick does not have transcendent right view. Indeed, he denies the very possibility of insight into reality as it truly is when it is this insight that, according to the Buddha, constitutes transcendent right view. We have already seen (p.148ff.) that, according to the Nikāyas, it is the insight into the causal nature of reality as it is that provides liberation from suffering. It is this personal knowledge and insight that characterises transcendent right view. Although Hick’s views may be right in some respects on the ‘ordinary’ level, they are not transcendent right views because they are not founded in knowledge of reality as it is: “Since they have no clear, personal knowledge, even the mere fragmentary knowledge that those good recluses clarify (about their view) is declared to be clinging on their part.”⁸⁶⁷

Hick’s hypothesis, then, is the view of an ‘ordinary person’ (*puthujjana*), and as such it is ultimately not to be trusted. This is demonstrated in the analogy in which an ordinary man is likened to a blind man; when he finally attains transcendent knowledge and vision he realises that he has been “tricked, cheated, defrauded by this mind.”⁸⁶⁸

As we saw in chapter four, however, one cannot gain transcendent right view simply by willing it. One has to start with ordinary right view, and in so far as it promotes ethical conduct Hick’s hypothesis is an ordinary right view that causes the development of the path-factors in their positive aspect.

In a way, Hick’s transcendental agnosticism is highly appropriate, for in it Hick recognises the limitations of his current knowledge. Consider the example of Prince Jayasena, who did not believe his friend’s description of the view from the top of the mountain because he himself was only halfway up and the view was obscured by him. He questions his friend’s description of the view: “It is impossible, friend, it cannot happen that while standing on top of the mountain you should see lovely parks ... lovely ponds.” Only when he has been led up the mountain and sees the view for himself does he believe that it exists. The Buddha argues that this story is analogous to the difference between the knowledge of the ordinary person and the noble disciple:

“So too ... Prince Jayasena is obstructed, hindered, blocked, and enveloped by a still greater mass than this - the mass of ignorance. Thus it is impossible that Prince Jayasena, living in the midst of sensual pleasures, ... could know, see, or realise that which must be known through

⁸⁶⁶M i 140; Bhikkhu Bodhi 234 (see above p. 140)

⁸⁶⁷M ii 235; Bhikkhu Bodhi 844 (see above p. 152)

⁸⁶⁸M i 511-2; Bhikkhu Bodhi 616 (see above p.186)

renunciation, seen through renunciation, attained through renunciation, realised through renunciation.”⁸⁶⁹

In its denial of knowledge of reality *an sich*, Hick’s hypothesis provides an accurate description of the perspective of the ordinary person. Hick is being truthful in explaining that the ordinary person does not know Reality *an sich*, because he or she is not yet in a position to know it. However, from the Buddhist perspective, Hick is wrong in his denial of the *possibility* of transcendent knowledge in this life. Although Hick’s belief in eschatological verification admits the possibility of eventual transcendent knowledge in a future existence, the Buddha is clear in expressing that this transcendent knowledge is attainable now. Thus whilst the Buddha would perhaps approve of Hick’s accurate description of the limited knowledge of the ordinary person, he would surely see Hick as mistaken in his denial of the possibility of transcendent knowledge in this life.

So far, then, it has been suggested that Hick’s pluralistic hypothesis demonstrates many of the characteristics of ordinary right view. It encourages skilful ethical conduct and is partly motivated by a desire to avoid disputes and conflict over dogmatically held beliefs. Like all ordinary right views, however, it is fundamentally rooted in ignorance and craving. This manifests itself most clearly in Hick’s denial of the possibility of knowledge of the Real *an sich*.

Hick shows the right attitude for an ordinary person.

In that it is not grounded in transcendent knowledge of the way things truly are, and in that it denies the present possibility of such knowledge, Hick’s hypothesis might qualify as one “without consolation”. However, there are other respects in which, on the ‘ordinary’ level at least, Hick’s approach might qualify for the Buddha’s approval.

On his own admission, Hick has not had personal knowledge of the Real *an sich*; in Buddhist terms, he has not seen reality as it is and attained transcendent right view. Instead, he is faced with varying soteriological traditions and teachings. In such a situation, the Buddha’s recommendation is that one ‘preserves the truth’ by withholding judgement: “If a person has faith ... he preserves the truth when he says: ‘My faith is thus’, but he does not yet come to the definite conclusion: ‘Only this is true, anything else is wrong’.”⁸⁷⁰ Thus there is the “preservation of truth” in a state prior to the “discovery of truth”. As we saw in the *Cankī Sutta*⁸⁷¹, the correct attitude

⁸⁶⁹M iii 131; Bhikkhu Bodhi 991.

⁸⁷⁰M ii 171; Bhikkhu Bodhi 780 (see above, p. 167)

⁸⁷¹See above, pp. 166-7.

for an ordinary person is one of scrutiny. For example, when the Tathāgata claims that he “knows and sees”, his conduct should be scrutinised to see if it is in accordance with one who is freed from greed, hatred and delusion. If one is satisfied with the teacher’s conduct, then one should provisionally accept his teachings, scrutinise them and strive in accordance with them until “he realises with the body the ultimate truth and sees it by penetrating it with wisdom.”⁸⁷². In this way, there is “discovery of truth”.

In some ways, Hick’s hypothesis recommends an approach in accordance with this teaching. For example, Hick does not claim that the hypothesis is exclusively true and he does not completely dismiss other teachings. Indeed, one of the intended purposes of his hypothesis is to enable to co-existence of apparently ‘rival’ teachings. Similarly, with its ethical criteria of soteriological effectiveness, Hick’s hypothesis recommends a form of ‘investigation’ into conduct that resembles the Buddha’s teaching that one should scrutinise the behaviour of teachers. From one perspective, Hick’s transcendental agnosticism can be seen as an admission that in his present state, he does not *know* which teaching is true and that his agnosticism is a way of not committing to any particular teaching and ruling out others before he has the grounds to do so. However, from another perspective, Hick’s agnosticism could be seen as a rival truth claim that actually does rule out other teachings, and therefore does not ‘preserve the truth’. For example, we have seen that the Buddha grounds his teaching in personal experience of the way things truly are. In denying the possibility of this knowledge, Hick denies the teaching of the Buddha. From the Buddhist perspective, this denial is premature, for Hick is not yet in a position to make such judgements (here it is useful to recall the Prince Jayasena mountain analogy). This point rests on the kind of agnosticism that Hick promotes. If Hick is claiming that he does not know the nature of the Real *an sich*, then he is ‘preserving the truth’. If, however, he is making the claim that it is not possible *in principle* to know the Real *an sich*, then he is excluding other beliefs and is not ‘preserving the truth’. The difference between these two kinds of claim is that the former is a report of Hick’s phenomenal experience. The latter, however, is a claim about the nature of reality. From the Buddha’s perspective, the ‘ordinary person’ is only qualified to make a claim of the former category, for this is grounded in his or her own experience. The latter claim, however goes beyond experience and is made on the grounds of logic and inference; it is thus an ‘unreliable’ claim.

Returning to the idea of scrutinising a teacher’s conduct as a means of establishing his authority; Hick might argue that his pluralistic hypothesis does take this approach in its use of ethical conduct as a criteria for soteriological effectiveness.

⁸⁷²M ii 173; Bhikkhu Bodhi 782.

When the ‘saintly’ individuals and the levels of good ethical conduct within different traditions are compared, no particular teacher and tradition appears to be wiser or more accomplished in moral conduct than any other. I want to suggest that the Buddha’s response would be that Hick’s investigation does not go far enough. The Buddha does recognise that other teachers are accomplished in moral conduct. For example, in the *Mahāsīhanāda Sutta*, a wise man is said to recognise that other teachers have mastered skilful conduct and freed themselves from unskilful conduct “in part”, but the Buddha has “completely” attained these things⁸⁷³. We have already seen in chapter five how the Buddha claimed to be unsurpassed in moral conduct: “I do not see anywhere ... any other recluse, or any brahmin more accomplished in moral conduct than myself”⁸⁷⁴. As it has been discussed earlier in this chapter, the Buddha recognises other criteria, beyond moral conduct, as a sign of soteriological effectiveness. As we saw in the *Cankī Sutta*, when one is satisfied with a teacher’s moral conduct, then this provides justification for provisional faith in their teachings. These teachings must then be ‘scrutinised’ and tested against one’s own experience. In this context, this means practising the teachings, particularly meditation, until one gains the insight to verify or falsify a teaching with personal experience. The stage of good moral conduct, then, is a preliminary step in the process of the ‘discovery of truth’. This is demonstrated in the *Māgandiya Sutta* where it is explained that, with investigation of the Buddha’s teaching, accompanied by skilful ethical conduct, faith becomes superseded by (transcendent) knowledge and vision.⁸⁷⁵ From the Buddhist perspective, then, Hick’s hypothesis does not take investigation far enough; there is more than just ethical conduct that is a criteria for salvific effectiveness. Any individual that were to follow the course of training that the Buddha describes would set in motion the law of salvific causation, and would eventually come to know the reality as it really is for him or herself. The Buddha is unambiguous about describing the path he sets forth as the best way to attain this knowledge: it is “fully successful and perfect, with nothing lacking and nothing superfluous.”⁸⁷⁶ In the previous section we acknowledged that Hick’s denial of criteria beyond the ethical in judging salvific effectiveness was a point at which his hypothesis is at odds with the Buddhist tradition. Here we can see that, from the Buddhist perspective, it is on this issue that Hick is mistaken. Hick denies the very possibility of the knowledge and vision that the Buddha explains as the culmination of the path of practice that he sets out. It is a law of nature, part of the objective structure of reality, that if the right conditions of practice are in place, this goal will be attained. To a disciple with a view such as

⁸⁷³See above, p. 170.

⁸⁷⁴S i 138; see above, p. 172.

⁸⁷⁵See above, p. 152ff.

⁸⁷⁶D iii 126; Walshe 431.

Hick's, the Buddha might suggest that he suspend judgement on the possibility of attaining such knowledge until he or she had practised the path to the extent of gaining personal verification.

Before concluding this section it would be appropriate to consider once again the *Cūḷasakuludāyi Sutta*, for in some ways it provides a useful summary of the way in which the Buddha might have judged Hick's pluralistic hypothesis. Udāyin is a wanderer who believes that liberation consists of attaining "the perfect splendour". However, on being questioned by the Buddha, he is unable to describe what this splendour is like, for neither he nor his teachers have experienced it. As we have seen⁸⁷⁷, the Buddha criticises Udāyin on two counts; firstly, he is unable to justify his claims because they are not grounded in personal experience. Secondly, *because* his claims are not grounded in personal insight, he is not qualified to make them. I wish to suggest that the Buddha might have made a similar critique of Hick's pluralistic hypothesis. The reason why Hick is unable to say anything about reality *an sich* is because he has not had personal, transcendent insight of it. This in itself is not a criticism; however, from the Buddhist perspective, one who has not had personal direct knowledge of reality *an sich* is not in a position to make claims about it. Hick is right in so far as he claims that the 'ordinary person' does not know the Real *an sich* and so cannot make claims about it. He is wrong, however, in saying that the Real *cannot* be known *an sich*, for he is simply not in a position to make such a claim.

There is a further interesting point of comparison in the *Cūḷasakuludāyi Sutta*; Udāyin and his followers argue that the goal of their teaching, "an entirely pleasant world", can be attained by practising skilful conduct. As we have seen, the Buddha describes this as a preliminary stage; through his knowledge of reality and the process of salvific causation he knows that there are other things to be perfected, such as progression through the four stages of meditation. Hick's hypothesis therefore resembles Udāyin's in that it sees skilful moral conduct as a sufficient criteria for soteriological effectiveness, and therefore denies the stages beyond this that are explained by the Buddha.

Summary

Let us now summarise this critique of Hick's pluralistic hypothesis in the light of the Buddha's attitude towards other teachings and views in the Nikāyas.

1. Hick's hypothesis, in its advocacy of ethical conduct, and its attempt to avoid dogmatic disputes, is a form of ordinary right view.
2. In so far as it recognises the limited knowledge of the ordinary person, and, knowing of this limitation, is reluctant to finally praise or condemn any of the great

⁸⁷⁷See above p. 187ff.

world traditions, Hick's hypothesis 'preserves the truth'. The hypothesis is right in its recognition that the ordinary person is not in a position to make claims about the ultimate nature of reality.

3. Hick's hypothesis is mistaken in its denial of the possibility of direct personal knowledge of reality 'as it is' in this life. It implicitly suggests that all 'holy ways of life' are 'without consolation'; this is not the case. Although the individual on the 'ordinary level' is not in a position to make claims about the nature of reality as it is, there are individuals who have gained transcendent knowledge and have seen reality *an sich*. There is a path set forth by the Buddha that, if followed, enables the attainment of this transcendent knowledge.

4. If Hick's agnosticism is interpreted simply as an admission of ignorance, it could be seen as a facet of ordinary right view, in as much as it contains an accurate recognition of the limited knowledge of the ordinary person. However, as an ontological claim about the nature of reality, Hick's agnosticism is a wrong view, because it denies the possibility of liberation as taught by the Buddha, and thus undermines the Buddha's teachings.

Conclusion

To conclude, Hick's pluralistic hypothesis has been criticised on the following grounds from a primarily Buddhist perspective.

1. It is not genuinely pluralistic because it denies vital elements of Buddhist self-understanding which, if denied, would change the meaning and even the coherence of the Buddha's teachings. In this respect it is internally incoherent because it is not, in fact, a 'pluralistic hypothesis', even though it claims to be.
2. Related to the first criticism is the point that Hick's hypothesis is logically a form of exclusivism, for it operates by certain specific criteria that implicitly exclude other criteria and values.
3. Hick's hypothesis is also internally incoherent on the grounds of the 'ethical fruits' criteria. The ethical criteria that Hick employs are incoherent if not supported by a notion of 'right view', for they become vague and unspecific. Furthermore, it has been argued that Hick's focus on praxis represents the privileging of one particular philosophical and value-tradition (namely that of Western-liberalism) over others.
4. The Buddhist account provides a more coherent alternative than Hick's hypothesis, because it does provide ontological support (with the notion of 'transcendent right view') for the criteria of liberation. On Hick's own criteria that the most coherent hypothesis is the most acceptable one, the Buddhist account is thus more acceptable than Hick's.

5. Finally, it has been suggested that from the Buddhist point of view, Hick is in error in his hypothesis, for he makes claims that he is not qualified to make. He is right in his admission of his own fundamental ignorance, but profoundly mistaken in his claim that the Real *an sich* is unknowable.

There are many questions worthy of future research that have arisen during the course of this thesis. For example, the notion of a Buddhist approach to religious pluralism could be expanded in great detail, to provide a critique of specific religious traditions. As we have seen, Hick's broad criteria of 'ethical fruits' leads him to suppose that all religious traditions are equally effective. It would be interesting to compare different religious traditions in the light of the highly specific criteria presented by the Buddha to discover if there were a hierarchy of 'salvific effectiveness' amongst non-Buddhist and indeed Buddhist traditions. Another area of interest would be to compare the attitude towards other groups in the Nikāyas with that found in other Buddhist sources, for example in early Mahāyāna texts. Similarly, it would be interesting to consider the attitudes towards other religions espoused by contemporary Buddhist teachers to see how much they are informed by the early texts of their respective traditions.⁸⁷⁸

It would also be interesting to consider how Hick might respond to the critique in this thesis. Perhaps he would argue that he does not in fact propound an 'ontological' agnosticism, or that there is insufficient evidence (in terms of ethical fruits) to support the Buddha's claim that his holy life is 'fully successful and perfect, with nothing lacking.'

At the start of this thesis, I expressed that the subject was being approached from a standpoint sympathetic to the Buddhist tradition. However, a doctoral thesis perhaps epitomises many of the values of western, post-enlightenment academia. One of the conventions adhered to in this tradition is the methodology of debating between often conflicting positions as means of reaching truth or consensus. This process has its roots in the Hegelian method of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. This thesis is no exception to this process; for not only has it dealt primarily with two 'conflicting' accounts presented from within the Buddhist tradition and from Hick's hypothesis, but throughout it, the thought of various different thinkers has been marshalled in support of one view or another. I wish to close this thesis with the suggestion that, were I truly to embrace the Buddha's teaching as I have understood it in the Nikāyas, then I

⁸⁷⁸I have touched upon this issue in a paper in which I consider the Dalai Lama's attitude towards other religions. See "The Dalai Lama and the World Religions: A False Friend?" in *Religious Studies* 30, 1996, p. 271-279.

might turn my back on this form of scholarly discipline. The following extract from the *Dīghanakha Sutta* illustrates the grounds for this suggestion:

“A wise man among those recluses and brahmins who hold the doctrine and view ‘Something is acceptable to me, something is not acceptable to me’ considers thus: ‘If I obstinately adhere to my view ‘Something is acceptable to me, something is not acceptable to me’, and declare ‘Only this is true, anything else is wrong’, then I may clash with the two others: with a recluse or brahmin that holds the doctrine and view ‘Everything is acceptable to me’ and with a recluse or brahmin that holds the view ‘Nothing is acceptable to me’. I may clash with these two, and when there is a clash, there are disputes, there are quarrels; when there are quarrels, there is vexation.’ Foreseeing for himself clashes, disputes, quarrels and vexation, he abandons that view and does not take up some other view. This is how there comes to be the abandoning of these views; this is how there comes to be the relinquishing of these views.”⁸⁷⁹

The alternative to *not* clinging obstinately to a view is to equivocate through not knowing what is true or false: “‘I don’t say this, I don’t say that. I don’t say it is otherwise. I don’t say it is not. I don’t not say it is not.’”⁸⁸⁰

As we have seen, however, this is one of the wrong views of the *Brahmajāla Sutta*, the view of an ‘Eel-wiggler’. Here, then, I am raising the question of whether the academic debate that characterises this thesis is “merely the worry and vacillation of those immersed in craving.”⁸⁸¹ If I were truly to embrace the values of the Buddhist tradition as presented in the Nikāyas, perhaps the most appropriate response to the interfaith debate would be silence.

⁸⁷⁹M i 499; Bhikkhu Bodhi 605.

⁸⁸⁰D i 26; Walshe 80.

⁸⁸¹D i 40; Walshe 87.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Abe, Masao

“A Dynamic Unity in Religious Pluralism: A Proposal from the Buddhist Point of View.”, in J. Hick and Askari, ed. *The Experience of Religious Diversity* (Aldershot, Gower, 1985).

Almond Philip C.

The British Discovery of Buddhism (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1988).

Barnes, Philip

“Continuity and Development in John Hick's Theology”, *Studies in Religion*, 21/4, 1992, pp. 395-402.

Basham, A. L.

The Wonder that Was India: A survey of the history and culture of the Indian sub-continent before the arrival of the Muslims (London, Fontana, 1971).

The History and Doctrine of the Ājīvikas (Delhi, Motilal Banarsidass, 1981).

Bechert, H. (ed.)

The Dating of the Historical Buddha (Göttingen, Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht, 1991).

Bhikkhu Bodhi and Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli trans.

The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya (Kandy, Buddhist Publication Society, 1995).

Bhikkhu Bodhi

The Sutta on the All-Embracing Net of Views: The Brahmajāla Sutta and its commentarial exegesis (Kandy, Buddhist Publication Society, 1978).

The Discourses on the Fruits of Reclusheship (Kandy, Buddhist Publication Society, 1989).

Bond, George D.

“The Arahant: Sainthood in Theravāda Buddhism” in ed. Kieckhefer and Bond, *Sainthood: Its Manifestations in World Religions* (London, UCP, 1988).

Bronkhorst, Johannes

The Two Traditions of Meditation in Ancient India (Stuttgart, Franz Steiner Verlag Wiesbaden, 1986).

Cabezón, José Ignacio

Buddhism and Language: a study of Indo-Tibetan scholasticism (New York, SUNY, 1994).

“Buddhist Studies as a Discipline and the Role of Theory” in *The Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* Vol 18, 1995, pp. 231-268.

Cobb, John Jr.

“Christian Witness in a Plural World”, in ed. Hick and Askari, *The Experience of Religious Diversity*, pp. 144-162.

Collins, Steven

Selfless Persons; Imagery and Thought in Theravāda Buddhism (Cambridge, CUP, 1982).

“On the Very Idea of the Pali Canon”, *Journal of the Pali Text Society*, XV, pp. 89-196.

Compson, Jane

- "The Dalai Lama and the World Religions: A False Friend?" in *Religious Studies* 30, 1996, pp. 271-279.
- Copleston, R.S.
Buddhism, Primitive and Present, in Magadha and Ceylon (London, Longmans, Green and Co., 1892).
- Cousins, L. S.
 "Pali Oral Literature" in ed. P. Denwood and A. Piatigorsky, *Buddhist Studies: Ancient and Modern*, (London: Curzon Press, 1983), pp. 1-11.
 "The Dating of the Historical Buddha: A Review Article" in *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 6, 1996, pp. 57-63.
- Cupitt, Don
The Sea of Faith (London, BBC, 1985).
Taking Leave of God (London, SCM, 1980).
The World to Come (London, SCM, 1982).
- D'Costa, Gavin
 (ed.), *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered: the myth of a pluralistic theology of religions* (Orbis, New York, 1990).
John Hick's Theology of Religions: a critical evaluation (Lanham, University Press of America, 1987).
 "John Hick and Religious Pluralism: Yet Another Revolution." in ed. H. Hewitt, *Problems in the Philosophy of Religion* (London, Macmillan, 1991), pp. 3-18.
 "Whose Objectivity? Which Neutrality? The Doomed Quest for a Neutral Vantage Point from which to Judge Religions", *Religious Studies*, 29, 1993, pp. 79-95.
 "The Impossibility of a Pluralist View of Religions", *Religious Studies*, 32, 1996, pp. 223-232.
- de Jong, J.W.
A Brief History of Buddhist Studies in Europe and America (Varanasi, Bharat Bharati, 1976).
- de Silva, Padmasiri
 "Religious Pluralism: A Buddhist Perspective" in ed. Hick and Askari, *The Experience of Religious Diversity* (Aldershot, Gower, 1985), pp. 131-143.
- Denwood P. and A. Piatigorsky ed.
Buddhist Studies: Ancient and Modern (London: Curzon Press, 1983).
- Donovan, Peter
 "The Intolerance of Religious Pluralism", *Religious Studies*, 29, 1993, pp. 217-229.
- Elder, J.W. (ed.)
Chapters in Indian Civilisation (Dubuque, 1970).
- Eliade, Mercia,
The Sacred and the Profane (New York, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1959).
- Farquhar, John
The Crown of Hinduism (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1913).
- Feuerbach, Ludwig
The Essence of Religion (New York, Asa K. Butts & co., 1878, trans. A. Loos)
- Flood, Gavin
An Introduction to Hinduism (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996).
- Forman R.C. (ed.)

The Problem of Pure Consciousness: Mysticism and Philosophy (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990).

Gethin, Rupert

The Buddhist Path to Awakening: a study of the bodhi-pakkhiya dhamma (Leiden, Brill, 1992).

The Foundations of Buddhism (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1998).

"Wrong view (micchā-ditṭhi) and Right View (sammā-ditṭhi) in the Theravāda Abhidhamma.", in *Recent Researches in Buddhist Studies: essays in honour of Professor Y. Karunadasa*, (Colombo, Y. Karunadasa Felicitation Committee in Collaboration with the Chi Ying Foundation, Hong Kong, 1997), pp. 211-229.

Gombrich, Richard

Buddhist Precept and Practice: Traditional Buddhism in the Highlands of Ceylon (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1971).

Theravāda Buddhism: A Social History from Ancient Benares to Modern Colombo (London, Routledge Kegan Paul, 1988).

How Buddhism Began: The Conditioned Genesis of the Early Teachings. (London, Athlone Press, 1996).

"Dating the Buddha: A Red Herring Revealed" in Bechert, *The Dating of the Historical Buddha*, II, pp. 152-82.

Richard Gombrich and Gananath Obysekere,

Buddhism Transformed: Religious Change in Sri Lanka (New Jersey, Princeton University Press, 1988).

Griffiths, Paul J.,

On Being Mindless: Buddhist meditation and the mind-body problem (Open Court, Illinois, 1986).

Griffiths, Paul J. (ed.),

Christianity Through Non-Christian Eyes (New York, Orbis, 1990).

Griffiths, Paul and Lewis, Delmas

"On Grading Religions, Seeking Truth and Being Nice to People - A Reply to Professor Hick", *Religious Studies*, 19, 1983, pp. 75-80.

Hallisey, Charles

"Roads Taken and Not Taken in the Study of Theravāda Buddhism" in Lopez (ed.), *Curators of the Buddha* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 31-61.

Hart, David

Non-Realism and the Universe of Faiths (London, Mowbrays, 1996).

Harvey, Peter

An Introduction to Buddhism (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1990).

Hayes, Richard P

"Gotama Buddha and Religious Pluralism", in *Journal of Religious Pluralism*, 1991, pp. 65-96.

"Nāgarjuna's Appeal" in *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 22, 1994, pp. 299-318

Hewitt, Harold (ed.)

Problems in the Philosophy of Religion: Critical Studies of the Work of John Hick (London, Macmillan, 1991).

Hick, John

Faith and Knowledge (London, Oxford University Press, 1957)

God and the Universe of Faiths: essays in the philosophy of religion (London, Macmillan, 1973).

- Death and Eternal Life* (London, Macmillan, 1976).
- The Myth of God Incarnate*, (ed.) (London, SCM, 1977).
- God Has Many Names: Britain's new religious pluralism* (London, Macmillan, 1980).
- God Has Many Names* (U.S. Edition), (Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1982).
- Problems of Religious Pluralism* (London, Macmillan, 1985).
- An Interpretation of Religion: human responses to the transcendent* (London, Macmillan, 1989).
- The Rainbow of Faiths: critical dialogues on religious pluralism* (London, SCM, 1995).
- Disputed Questions in Theology and the Philosophy of Religion* (London, Macmillan, 1993).
- "Mystical Experience as Cognition" in Woods, *Understanding Mysticism* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Image Books, 1980), pp.415-21.
- "The Possibility of Religious Pluralism: A Reply to Gavin D'Costa" in *Religious Studies* 33, 1996, pp. 161-166.
- Hick and Askari, ed.
The Experience of Religious Diversity (Aldershot, Gower, 1985).
- Jaini, Padmanabh S.
 "Śrāmaṇas; Their Conflict with Brāhmanical Society" in J. W. Elder (ed), *Chapters in Indian Civilisation* (Dubuque, 1970), 139-81.
- James, William
The Varieties of Religious Experience (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1902).
- Jayatileke, K.N.
Early Buddhist Theories of Knowledge (London, Allen and Unwin, 1963).
 "The Buddhist Attitude to Other Religions", *The Wheel Publication* 216 (Kandy, Buddhist Publication Society, 1991).
- Kalupahana, David
Causality: the Central Philosophy of Buddhism (Honolulu, University Press of Hawaii, 1976).
- Kant, Immanuel
Critique of Pure Reason (London, Macmillan, 1939).
- Katz, Stephen
 (ed.) *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1978).
 "Language, Epistemology and Mysticism" in *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, pp.22-74.
- Kieckhefer and Bond
Sainthood: Its Manifestations in World Religions (UCP, Berkeley, 1988).
- Kloppenborg, Ria
The Paccekabuddha: A Buddhist Ascetic (Leiden, Brill, 1974).
- Lipner, Julius
 "Does Copernicus Help? Reflections for a Christian Theology of Religions", *Religious Studies*, 13, 1977, pp. 243-58.
- Lopez, Donald S Jr., (ed.)
Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995).

- Mahāsaṃghika Origins: The Beginnings of Buddhist Sectarianism”, *History of Religions* 16, 1976, pp.237-72.
- Masefield, Peter
Divine Revelation in Pali Buddhism (Colombo, Sri Lankan Institute of Traditional Studies, 1986).
- Matusnaga Alicia
The Buddhist Philosophy of Assimilation (Tokyo, Sophia University in Co-operation with Charles E. Tuttle Company, 1969).
- Mc Gann, Jerome
The Textual Condition, (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1991).
- Milbank, John
 “The End of Dialogue” in ed. D’Costa, *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, (Orbis, New York, 1990), pp. 174-191.
- Murti, T.R.V.
The Central Philosophy of Buddhism (London, George Allen and Unwin, 1960).
- Norman, K.R.
 “Aśoka and Capital Punishment: notes on a portion of Aśoka's fourth pillar edict, with an appendix on the accusative absolute construction”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1, 1975, pp.16-24.
- Obeysekere, Gananath
 “Religious Symbolism and Political Change in Ceylon” in ed. Gananath Obysekere, Frank Reynolds, Bardwell L. Smith, *The Two Wheels of Dhamma: Essays on the Theravāda Tradition in India and Ceylon* (Pennsylvania, Chambersborg, 1972), pp. 58-78.
- Obysekere, Gananath; Reynolds, Frank; Smith, Bardwell L.
The Two Wheels of Dhamma: Essays on the Theravāda Tradition in India and Ceylon (Pennsylvania, Chambersborg, 1972).
- Payutto, P.
Dependent Origination: The Buddhist Law of Causality (Bangkok, Buddhaddhamma Foundation, 1994.).
- Perovich Anthony N. Jr.
 “Does the Philosophy of Mysticism Rest on a Mistake?” in R.C. Forman (ed.), *The Problem of Pure Consciousness*, pp 237-253.
- Prebish, Charles S.
 “A Review of Scholarship of the Buddhist Councils” in *Journal of Asian Studies*, 33, 1974, pp. 239-54.
- Prebish, Charles S. and Nattier, James J.
 “Mahāsaṃghika Origins: The Beginnings of Buddhist Sectarianism”, *History of Religions*, 16, 1976, pp. 237-72.
- Pye, Michael
Skilful Means: A Concept in Mahāyāna Buddhism. (London, Duckworth, 1978).
- Race, Alan
Christians and Religious Pluralism (Second Edition, London, 1993).
- Rahner, Karl
Theological Investigations vol. 6 (London, Darton Longman and Todd, 1969).
- Rahula, Walpola
What the Buddha Taught (Gordon Fraser, Surrey, 1972).
- Renfrew, Colin

- Archaeology and Language: The Puzzle of Indo-European Origins* (London, Penguin, 1989).
- Rhys Davids, T. W.
Buddhism: being a sketch of the life and teachings of Gautama, the Buddha (London, SPCK, 1887).
- Robinson, Richard H.
 "Comments on 'Non-Western Studies: The Religious Approach' by Wilfred Cantwell Smith", *A Report on an invitational Conference on the Study of Religion in the State University*, [New Haven: the Society for Religion in Higher Education, nd. (Conference held Oct 23-25 1964)].
- Sadhatissa, H.
The Buddha's Way (London, George Allen and Unwin, 1985).
- Said, Edward,
Orientalism (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).
- Sharf, Robert H.
 "The Zen of Japanese Nationalism" in *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism*, ed. Lopez (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1995), pp. 107-160.
- Sharma, Arvind, (ed.)
God, Truth and Reality: essays in honour of John Hick (London, Macmillan, 1983).
- Sharpe, E.J.
Understanding Religion (London, Duckworth, 1983).
Comparative Religion: A History (London, Duckworth, 1975).
- Smart, Ninian,
 "A Contemplation of Absolutes" in ed. Arvind Sharma, *God Truth and Reality*, pp. 176-188.
- Smith, Wilfred Cantwell
The Meaning and End of Religion (London, SPCK, 1978).
- Stace, Walter
Mysticism and Philosophy (London, Macmillan, 1960).
- Surin, Kenneth
 "A 'Politics of Speech'; Religious Pluralism in the Age of the McDonald's Hamburger", in ed. D'Costa, *Christian Uniqueness Reconsidered*, pp. 192-212.
- Suzuki, D.T.
Essays in Zen Buddhism, Third Series (London and New York, Rider, 1953).
- Tuck, Andrew
Comparative Philosophy and the Philosophy of Scholarship: on the Western interpretation of Nāgārjuna (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1990).
- Underhill, Evelyn
Mysticism (New York, Dutton, 1911).
- Walshe, Maurice
Thus Have I Heard: The Long Discourses of the Buddha (Wisdom Publications, London, 1987).
- Whaling, Frank
Contemporary Approaches to the Study of Religion, Vol 1: the humanities. (Mouton; Berlin, New York and Amsterdam, 1984).
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig
Philosophical Investigations (Blackwell, Oxford, 1963, trans. Anscombe).

Woods, C.

Understanding Mysticism (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Image Books, 1980).

Zaehner, R.C.

Hindu and Muslim Mysticism (New York, Schocken Books, 1961).

Primary Texts

The Dīgha Nikāya

- Part One* (London, Pali Text Society, 1976).
- Part Two* (London, Pali Text Society, 1982).
- Part Three* (London, Pali Text Society, 1975).

The Majjhima Nikāya

- Part One* (London, Pali Text Society, 1979).
- Part Two* (London, Pali Text Society, 1977).
- Part Three* (London, Pali Text Society, 1977).

The Saṃyutta Nikāya

- Part One* (London, Pali Text Society, 1973).
- Part Two* (London, Pali Text Society, 1960).
- Part Three* (London, Pali Text Society, 1975).
- Part Four* (London, Pali Text Society, 1973).
- Part Five* (London, Pali Text Society, 1976).

The Aṅguttara Nikāya

- Part One* (London, Pali Text Society, 1961).
- Part Two* (London, Pali Text Society, 1976).
- Part Three* (London, Pali Text Society, 1976).
- Part Four* (London, Pali Text Society, 1979).
- Part Five* (London, Pali Text Society, 1979).

The Sutta Nipata (London, Routledge and Kegan Paul for the Pali Text Society, 1965).

Translations

The Long Discourses of the Buddha: A Translation of the Dīgha Nikāya, trans. Maurice Walshe (Kandy, Buddhist Publication Society, 1995).

Thus Have I Heard: The Long Discourses of the Buddha, trans. Maurice Walshe (London, Wisdom Publications, 1987).

The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha: A New Translation of the Majjhima Nikāya, trans. Bhikkhu Ñāṇamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi (Kandy, Buddhist Publication Society, 1995).

The Book of the Kindred Sayings, or Grouped Suttas.

- Part One*, trans. F.L. Woodward (London, Pali Text Society, 1930).
- Part Two*, trans. Mrs. Rhys-Davids (London, Pali Text Society, 1982).
- Part Three*, trans. F.L. Woodward (London, Pali Text Society, 1925).
- Part Four*, trans. F.L. Woodward (London, Pali Text Society, 1927).
- Part Five*, trans. F.L. Woodward (London, Pali Text Society, 1930).

The Book of the Gradual Sayings, or More Grouped Suttas.

Part One, trans. F.L. Woodward (London, Pali Text Society, 1932).

Part Two, trans. F.L. Woodward (London, Pali Text Society, 1933).

Part Three, trans. E.M. Hare (London, Pali Text Society, 1934).

Part Four, trans. E.M. Hare (London, Pali Text Society, 1935).

Part Five, trans. F.L. Woodward (London, Pali Text Society, 1936).

The Sutta-Nipāta, trans. H. Sadhatissa (London, Curzon Press, 1985).

The Dhammapada, trans. Narada Marathera, (Colombo; Vajrarama, 1972).

The Rig Veda, trans. Wendy O'Flaherty (Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1981).